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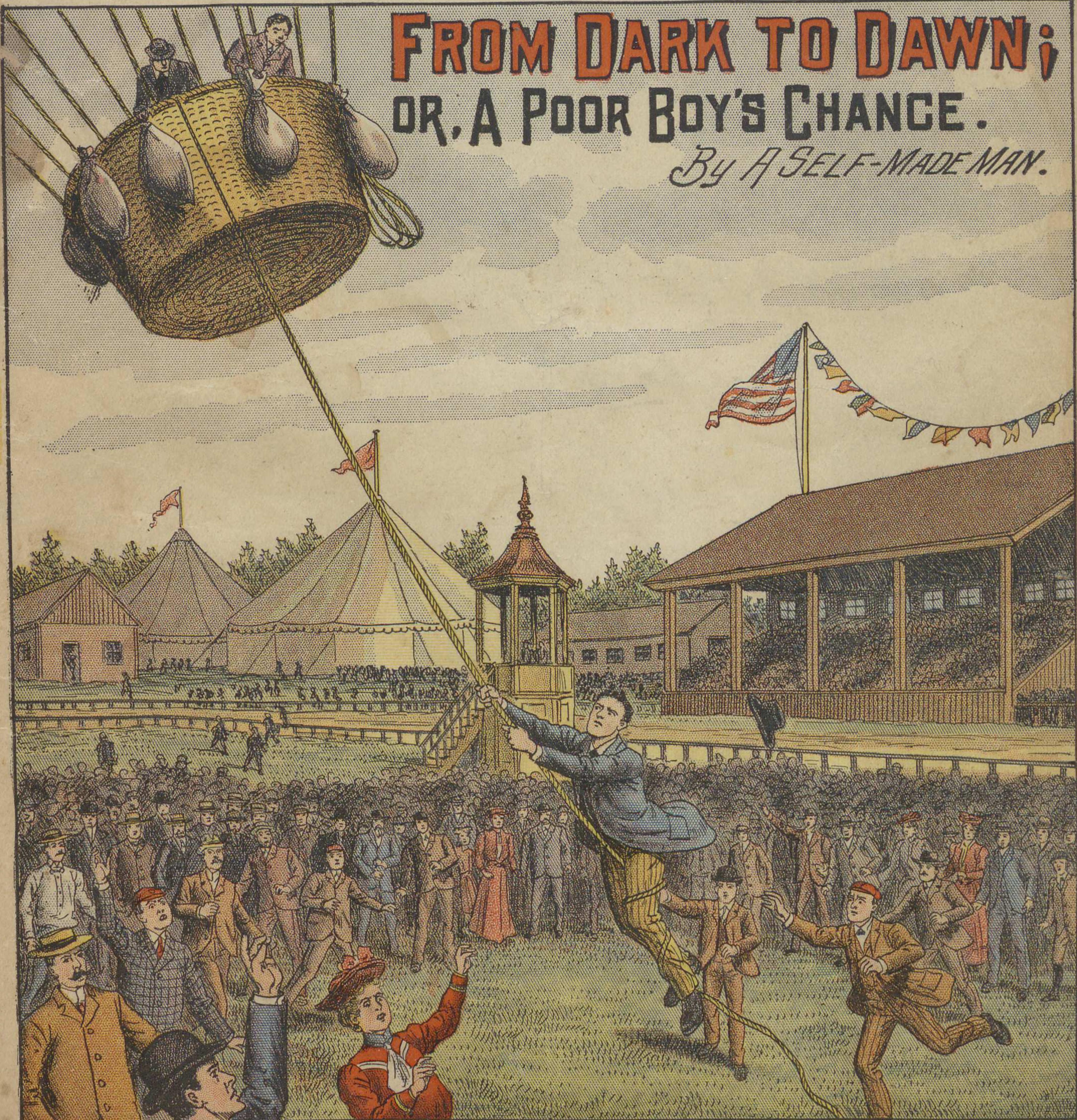
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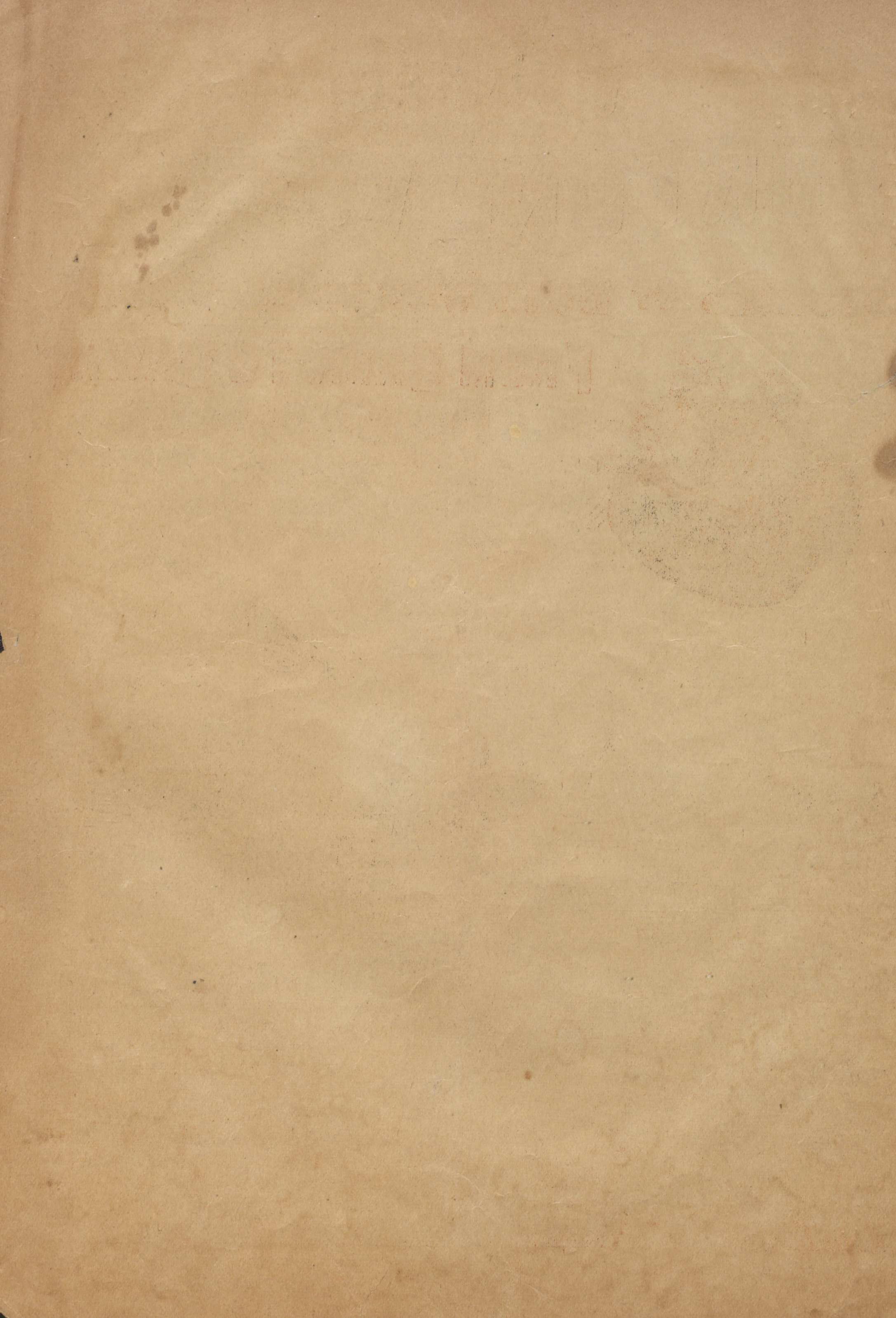
STORIES OF BOYS WHO MAKE MONEY.

FROM DARK TO DAWN;
OR, A POOR BOY'S CHANCE.

By A SELF-MADE MAN.



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STORIES OF BOYS WHO MAKE MONEY

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From Dark to Dawn

OR,

A POOR BOY'S CHANCE

By A SELF-MADE MAN

CHAPTER I.

THE LAST STRAW.

"Hello, Clem, where are you bound this morning?" asked Will Ashmore, a bright looking lad of sixteen.

"I'm bound for New Orleans," replied Clement Lambert in a dogged kind of way.

"Bound for New Orleans!" exclaimed Will, clearly astonished.

Clem nodded gloomily.

"What are you going there for?"

"To look for something to do, or ship aboard some vessel, as the case may be."

"The deuce you say! Then you've cut loose from Mr. Fowler at last."

"I have, for good and all."

"Well, I'm not surprised. You stood more from him than I would if I'd been in your place."

"The last straw was dumped on me this morning."

"What did he do to you?"

"He accused me of stealing a dollar from the store till."

"He did?"

"Yes. I denied it, of course, for I wouldn't take a cent from anybody, poor as I am, that didn't belong to me. But my word didn't have any weight with Mr. Fowler, so I let him search me."

"He didn't find the dollar, did he?"

"No, he didn't, and that made him madder than ever."

Then he went up into my room and pulled everything apart there."

"What good did that do him?"

"He found a tin box with something like two dollars in small change in my old trunk. I picked that up one way or another doing favors for different people."

"Well?" said Will Ashmore in an interested tone.

"He took the box and put it in his pocket saying he would keep it as security till I returned him the dollar bill."

"That was meaner than dirt."

"Oh, that is quite in line with Mr. Fowler's character," replied Clem, bitterly.

"But he had no right to rob you when you didn't take his money."

"What's right and fair doesn't cut any figure with Mr. Fowler."

"Did he really lose a dollar?"

"Yes. It was missing from the till after breakfast."

"How do you know it was?"

"Because it was the only dollar in the drawer—a brand new bill on the First National of New Orleans. I took it in myself in payment for some goods I sold a customer soon after I opened the store."

"I s'pose you've no idea where that bill went?"

"I have a strong suspicion on the subject."

"You have? What do you think became of it?"

"I think Upton Fowler appropriated it."

"Why do you think Upton took it?"

"Because he wanted a dollar pretty bad."

"What for?"

"He has his mind set on going to the Lakeport fair ground where the balloon ascension is to take place this afternoon."

"Did you tell your suspicions to his father?"

"No. It wouldn't have done any good if I had done so."

"He wouldn't have believed you?"

"No, he wouldn't."

"I thought Mr. Fowler kept Upton in pocket money?" said Will.

"I believe he gives him two bits a week."

"Is that all? Upton usually has more than that in his clothes. Two bits wouldn't go very far with him."

"I don't know anything about that; but I do know that he was strapped yesterday afternoon. He tried to borrow a dollar of me, for he found out that I had some money saved. I couldn't see it, because I knew that would be the last of my dollar. He isn't one of the repaying kind."

"That's right. He's owed me four bits for six months. Then you think he took the missing dollar?"

"I do. He was in the store when I went to breakfast."

"Does he know that his father accused you of taking the bill?"

"He does."

"And he never said a word?"

"Not a syllable; but he seemed to be greatly tickled over the scrape I was in."

"That isn't strange. He doesn't like you for a cent."

"I know he doesn't. It isn't my fault for I have often done him a favor. If I got right down on my knees to him, which isn't my way by a long shot, he wouldn't be a bit more friendly. He hates me on general principles, and that covers the whole ground."

The two boys were standing in the road not far from Will Ashmore's home.

Clement Lambert was a poor boy.

He was a good looking, sturdy lad, with a bright, honest face that would have inspired confidence anywhere.

His nature was self-reliant and ambitious, but he was sadly handicapped by an adverse fate.

Left an orphan at a tender age he had been brought up and partly educated at the expense of the county.

At the age of ten he was turned over to Jefferson Fowler, storekeeper, of the village of Gretna, who contracted to board, clothe and educate him in return for his services in the store and around his house.

Up to the time this story opens he had been with Mr. Fowler six years.

His board had been both plain and scanty; his clothes the cast-off garments of Upton Fowler, the storekeeper's son, while his education had been limited to suit Mr. Fowler's convenience.

After the first three years there had been times when the relations between Clem Lambert and the Fowlers had been so strained that the boy almost made up his mind to cut

loose from them and seek his own fortune out in the wide world.

But the crisis always passed without Clem carrying his resolution into effect.

The older he grew the less he liked the treatment handed out to him, until the "last straw," as he called it, was reached when Mr. Fowler accused him of theft.

That proved to be the turning point in his young career, for he had now taken the bit between his teeth and "passed the Rubicon."

"Did you tell Mr. Fowler that you intended leaving him?" asked Will Ashmore, who was Clem's one good friend and associate in Gretna.

"I did not, for there surely would have been a terrible flare-up."

"How then did you manage the matter?"

"When Mr. Fowler sent me down the road with a package of groceries to the Singleton house I slipped up to my room, made up a hasty bundle of my things, and took them along. By the time he begins to get wrathful over my absence I expect to be some distance from the village."

"Then he'll get out his rig, chase after you and try to bring you back."

"He'll have a swell time doing the last," replied Clem, resolutely.

"Now look here, Clem, I don't blame you a bit for breaking away from Mr. Fowler, for I don't believe there's a meaner man under the sun than he; but I hate to have you go away just the same. I like you better than any boy I ever knew, and we've been chums as far as circumstances would let us. Now I want you to come up to the house and take dinner with us. Then I want you to go with me over to Lakeport to see the balloon go up, and have one last good time together. I'll stand all the expense—you know I can afford it—and it can't make much difference with you whether you go to New Orleans to-day or to-morrow. You'll do this, won't you?"

"You're very kind, Will, and I sha'n't forget your friendly offer. The only regret I have in leaving Gretna is parting with you. If I hadn't met you on the road I was going to stop at your house on the chance of seeing you before I left the neighborhood. I'd take you up only I'm afraid it would lead to an unpleasant meeting with Mr. Fowler."

"Don't you worry about Mr. Fowler. He won't disturb you at our house. In fact, he'll never know you're there. As for the chance of meeting him at Lakeport it is a slim one. He's the last man in Gretna to part with four bits to see the inside of the fair grounds unless he absolutely had information that you were there, and he was confident of being able to make you return home with him."

After some further argument Clem permitted himself to be persuaded to fall in with Will's proposition, and the two boys turned in together at the next lane.

Ten minutes later Mr. Jefferson Fowler came tearing down the road in a light wagon, keeping a sharp lookout ahead for Clem Lambert, whose non-return to the store led

him to suspect that the lad had run away as he had often threatened to do.

Mr. Fowler felt as angry as he looked.

Clem was too valuable an assistant to be lightly lost, and yet no one was more to blame for his secession from the store than Mr. Fowler himself.

There probably wasn't a more unreasonable man in the whole State of Louisiana.

His disposition had cost him many a dollar, and it was now about to lose him the services of the best boy he was ever likely to have in his store.

He drove all the way to the next village, made many inquiries for Clem Lambert, but without success.

Then feeling sure the runaway boy had departed in the opposite direction he hurriedly retraced his way, never dreaming as he passed the lane leading to the Ashmore house that the boy he sought was there enjoying the last few hours of his stay in Gretna.

CHAPTER II.

SNATCHED OFF THE EARTH.

At two o'clock that afternoon Clem Lambert and Will Ashmore approached the gate of the fair grounds at the town of Lakeport, situated on the shore of Lake Pontchartrain.

Instinctively Clem glanced around with a wary eye on the lookout for Mr. Fowler, but that individual at that moment was in his store at Gretna village several miles away in a very bad humor indeed after his unavailing search for his runaway assistant.

Will took the lead, for he had the money in his hand to pay for their admission.

Suddenly he turned around and called Clem's attention to a boy just ahead.

It was Upton Fowler in the act of passing up a brand new dollar bill to the ticket seller.

"I guess that's the bill that caused the trouble between you and Mr. Fowler this morning," whispered Will. "You said it was a new one."

"That's right," nodded Clem. "I was sure he took it." Upton got his change and passed inside the grounds.

"Will you tell me what bank that new bill was on you just took from that boy?" Will asked the ticket seller as he passed up two fifty cent pieces.

The man looked a bit surprised.

"What do you want to know for, young feller?" he inquired, as he handed out two bits of pasteboard.

"Just curiosity," answered Will.

The man looked in his money drawer.

"First National, of New Orleans," was his reply.

"Thanks," replied Will, then he and Clem passed on. "It's the bill beyond a doubt," he said to his companion. "I never did fancy Upton, but I'll think less of him after this. A boy who will deliberately steal from his father isn't to be depended on."

"I should say not," replied Clem.

Upton had vanished in the crowd that thronged the fair

ground and the two boys saw no more of him for an hour, during which time they wandered around the place and saw two trotting races between local two-year-olds.

Everybody then gravitated toward the big open spot where the balloon was now being inflated for its aerial journey.

It was an interesting sight to watch the great oiled-silk bag swell out as it lay in folds on the ground, gradually assume form and finally rise into the air, where it received its final cargo of gas as it swung above the round basket car.

The car itself was secured to the ground, not by its long anchor-rope, which lay coiled up close by, but by strong short ropes attached to stakes driven into the ground.

Heavy bags of sand hung at intervals around the outside of the basket.

At last the balloon was fully inflated, its silken sides bellying out as round and as hard as one of the red toy balloons one sometimes sees for sale in the streets of a big city.

It swung about as a strong puff of wind occasionally struck it, and tugged at the ropes like a small yacht pulls at its anchor while its mainsail is being hoisted.

Clem and Will stood on the front line of the crowd and consequently had an unobstructed view of everything that was going on.

The gas generator was carried away and the ground around the balloon cleared of other obstructions.

The crowd then gradually encroached upon the open space, like crowds will do on such occasions, until the two boys found themselves quite close to the basket.

The promoters of the exhibition thought the mob too close for safety, and calling on their assistants began to harangue the sightseers, and to force them back.

This was a difficult job to accomplish, and in the confusion that ensued Clem and Will got separated.

The crowd was finally driven back a few yards all around, and there remained—a dense circle of humanity.

Clem looked about for his companion, but could not see him.

At length the two men who were slated to go up in the balloon were seen forcing their way through the mob with bundles and packages they were going to take up with them.

Clem was surprised to see Upton Fowler tagging after them with his arms full of packages, too.

When they arrived at the balloon, one of the men helped Upton into the basket and then began handing him the bundles to stow away inside the car.

The men then returned the way they came after motioning Upton to get out.

Instead of obeying this order, Upton remained leaning over the edge of the basket, seeming to enjoy being the focus of all eyes.

At length he spied Will Ashmore in the crowd.

"Hey, Will, come here. Come and take a look inside of the balloon."

Ashmore, overcome with boyish curiosity, walked over to the balloon.

"Want to get in and see how it feels?" grinned Upton. Will shook his head dubiously.

"Oh, come on," urged Upton. "What are you afraid of? It feels great."

He grabbed Ashmore by the arm and began to pull him in.

"Be quick," he said. "We can only stay a minute for the men are coming back. You won't get another chance like this."

Will allowed himself to be persuaded and got into the basket.

As he looked around, enjoying the sensation, he saw Clem and yelled at him.

"Come over and get in the basket."

Upton frowned.

"What do you want to ask him for?" he growled. "I don't want him in here. He ran off from the store this morning after stealing a dollar from the till."

"That's a lie!" retorted Will, angrily. "You stole that dollar yourself."

"Didn't steal it," replied Upton, growing red in the face. "Dad said Clem stole it, and he ought to know."

"It was a brand new dollar bill on the First National of New Orleans."

"What if it was?" answered Upton, doggedly.

"We saw you give that bill to the ticket seller at the gate. We were right behind you when you entered the grounds."

"You're off your perch!" said Upton, with a guilty flush.

"No, I'm not off my perch. Here, Clem, Upton says he didn't take that dollar."

"He knows better than that," replied Clem, advancing half way toward the basket and standing close to the coiled anchor rope.

"You'll get it when you go back to the store," called out Upton, with a grin. "Dad won't do a thing to you for going off without leave."

"He won't do anything to me, for I'm not going back," replied Clem, coolly.

"You're not going back?" cried Upton, in astonishment.

"No, I'm not. You can tell your father when you return that he's seen the last of me. I've been a slave long enough for him. After this I'm going to hoe my own row, and keep what's coming to me."

"Where are you going?" asked Upton, curiously.

"Don't you worry about where I'm going."

"Dad'll find out and fetch you back."

"He'll do nothing of the kind. This is a free country. He can't chase after me like they used to do years ago after the runaway slaves. I'm my own boss now."

"You ain't got any right to leave the store till you're twenty-one," retorted Upton.

"Who says so?"

"Dad says so."

"He'll have a sweet time trying to carry his words out," replied Clem.

Just then the men appeared forcing their way through the crowd.

"Get out of that basket, you two!" roared the foremost one.

"Gee! We'd better sneak!" cried Upton.

He and Will in their hurry to get out detached two of the sandbags.

At that moment a blast of air swooped upon the balloon.

The inflated bag gave a sudden and vicious tug at the short ropes and both of the boys tumbled back into the basket.

Snap! Snap! Snap!

Three of the ropes gave way.

The crowd shouted a hoarse warning to the two boys who had picked themselves up.

Another puff of wind struck the gas bag.

The remaining ropes were unable to resist the sudden strain and parted almost simultaneously.

Instantly the balloon released from its moorings rose into the atmosphere.

A roar of dismay went up from the assembled multitude. This cry was immediately changed into one of horror.

The long anchor-rope uncoiled rapidly.

Switching back and forth, its snaky folds got entangled with Clem Lambert's legs.

He had only time enough to seize the rope with both hands when he was whisked off the ground and carried heavenward.

CHAPTER III.

WANDERERS THROUGH SPACE.

Almost before Clem realized the gravity of his peril he was swinging five hundred feet in the air.

The big crowd below was dumb with consternation.

Will and Upton, looking over the edge of the basket caught a glimpse of Clem clinging to the rope, but both were so overcome with terror at their situation that they could not move a finger to aid the lad below.

Clem recovered his self-possession first, and he saw his only chance of safety lay in climbing up the rope to the basket.

He lost no time in doing this, the spell-bound crowd below watching his efforts with the greatest of anxiety.

He presently reached the bottom of the basket and called out.

"Will—Will Ashmore! Give me a hand!"

Then his chum woke up to Clem's desperate predicament.

"Great Scott, Upton! Don't you know Clem is hanging on to the anchor-rope of the balloon? Help me pull him into the car."

Upton, however, made no effort to go to Lambert's assistance, so it remained for Will to grab Clem's extended hand and assist him into the basket, where he sat down whitefaced and trembling as the reaction set in.

The balloon was now all of one thousand feet above the earth and the fair ground was a mile away.

They had struck a current of air that was carrying them rapidly in a southerly direction.

"We're in a nice pickle," said Will, at last. "The Lord only knows where we will fetch up."

Upton crouched on one side of the basket frightened out of his seven senses.

His face was the color of chalk, and his eyes protruded like a lobster's.

Clem got up and looked over the edge of the car.

"My gracious! We're high in the air!" he said. "And just to think I was swinging down there from that anchor rope! I don't like to think of it," he added with a shudder.

"I saw you," replied Will; "but I was so upset at first that I couldn't do a thing to help you out."

"I wonder how high we are now?" said Clem. "We seem to be getting higher every moment."

He looked around the car for an instrument he expected to find that would give them an idea of their altitude.

He found it presently and was able to make out that the balloon was already about fifteen hundred feet above the earth.

"We must look like a mere speck to those people in the fair ground by this time. We're leaving the town and lake far behind us."

"If we go on at this rate we'll soon be over the gulf, and then our name will be mud if the balloon descends in the water," remarked Will, with a very sober face.

"How far is it to the nearest land after leaving the State of Louisiana?" said Clem, looking at Will, who was well up in geographical distances.

"That's a pretty large question," replied Will. "If we should be blown right across the gulf to the most northern part of Yucatan, the distance is about six hundred miles. If we're carried more to the west, to Campeachy Bay, the distance is all of three hundred miles further. We may not go that way at all, though it looks as if we were at present, for if you will look to the south you will see a long glistening white line that I'll bet marks the shore of the gulf. The wind is liable to change at any moment and carry us to the southern part of Texas, or down further into Mexico."

"I don't want to go to Mexico," groaned Upton, finding his tongue for the first time. "I want to go home."

"It doesn't look now as if you'll get home for a week, if you ever do," replied Will.

"Oh, lor'! Where are we anyway?"

"We're sixteen hundred feet above the earth, sailing to the south."

"Sixteen hundred feet!" gasped Upton, with a shiver. "We're as good as dead."

"Not at all," laughed Clem. "Get up and take a look down. It's the finest sight you'll ever see if you live to be a hundred."

"I wouldn't dare look down."

"Why not? You can't fall out."

Upton wouldn't stir from his place in the bottom of the basket.

Will and Clem had now fully recovered from their fright, and being lads of some nerve they began to enjoy the novelty of their situation.

They possessed enough philosophy in their composition to feel that they might as well make the best they could out of a bad predicament.

It was a rare treat for them for the time being.

The only thing that really troubled their serenity was the question where the balloon might ultimately land.

Somehow it did not occur to them that there was a cord running up to the top of the bag that controlled the quantity of gas in the balloon.

By pulling on it they could let out the gas, and thus descend earthward.

In the course of half an hour they could plainly make out the water of the Gulf of Mexico in the distance, and there wasn't any doubt about them being carried straight toward it.

They had an instrument in the car which would have measured the velocity of the wind if they had known how to use it and been able to figure out the result.

As a matter of fact the current they were in was carrying them to the south at something like thirty-five miles an hour.

Their course at present was shaped toward the most northern point of Yucatan, and if the wind held as it did it would take them seventeen hours to cross the gulf to Cape Catoche.

Clem presently ascertained that their altitude had gone to eighteen hundred feet, where it appeared to be about stationary.

After a time Upton awoke from his trance and asked again where the balloon was.

"We're over the gulf now," replied Will.

"Are we as high as ever?"

"Yep. And it's a good thing we keep up, too."

"Why?"

"Because we've got a long reach of water to face from the present outlook, and I'm not anxious to get too near to it."

Upton was finally induced to look over the rim of the basket, and the sight of the immensity of space beneath him took his breath away, and he drew back in terror.

"If we were to fall now we'd be killed—smashed into little bits."

"Don't let that worry you. You'd never know what happened to you."

"Why wouldn't I?"

"Your breath would be gone, and you'd be a dead one before you hit the water."

Upton looked as if he would collapse again.

By sundown they were well out over the gulf, sailing along at the same rate.

"Say, Will, it's beginning to feel deuced cold," said Clem, after a time.

"That's right—it is. And I'm getting hungry, too."

"So am I. I never thought of that fact before. We're liable to starve before this balloon lands us somewhere."

"Maybe there's something to eat in those bundles," suggested Will. "Those chaps wouldn't have been such fools as to go off without preparing for a day or two's stay among the clouds."

"That sounds reasonable. Let's overhaul them."

They lost no time in doing so, and found quite a liberal supply of bread, cakes, pies and canned meats and vegetables, as well as fruits.

"Say this is all right, Will," cried Clem, smacking his lips hungrily. "We won't starve for three or four days at any rate."

"You can bet we won't," he replied in a tone of satisfaction. "Let's have supper."

The word supper had a magic sound for Upton, and he grew interested at once.

There was a keg of water, and a jar of cold coffee, milked but unsweetened.

They found a package of sugar, however, and so they soon fixed the coffee to suit their individual tastes.

The three made a good meal, with blankets over their shoulders, for the darker it grew the colder the air became.

The moisture in the air gathered and clung to the sides of the balloon, and this had the effect of decreasing their altitude, for when Clem next looked at the instrument, he found that it registered sixteen hundred feet, and seemed to be going lower.

After talking awhile the three wanderers through space huddled close together for warmth, and ere long fell asleep.

And while they slept through the night the balloon kept on its journey southward over the big Gulf of Mexico, a very small object indeed in that immensity of space.

CHAPTER IV.

IN BRAZIL.

It was sun rise when the three boys awoke.

The first thing Clem did was to look at the altitude instrument which told him the balloon had sunk to fourteen hundred feet.

Then he jumped up and looked over the edge of the basket.

There was nothing to be seen below but water—they might have been in the middle of the Atlantic or the Pacific ocean for all the land that was in sight.

"Come, Will, take a peep," he said.

Will came and so did Upton, too.

The latter had got over his panic, and was able to look down without feeling demoralized.

The boys hung over the rim of the basket for ten minutes, and then adjourned to breakfast.

As the sun rose higher in the heavens the moisture on the balloon dried and it rose gradually to a height of over seventeen hundred feet.

About seven o'clock in the morning they sighted land,

which proved to be the coast of Yucatan, though the boys did not know what it was.

At four in the afternoon they struck an immense body of water on their left with land stretching away to their right.

They were soon passing over the Gulf of Honduras, with the Caribbean Sea in the distance.

The balloon had dropped to a height of fifteen hundred feet, and striking a different current they were borne to the E. S. E., right over the Caribbean Sea.

When another night closed in on them there was nothing but water to be seen again, with just a blue streak of coast line in the distance to the west.

When they awoke next morning they were still sailing at an altitude of fifteen hundred feet over a limitless watery space.

"Where are we at now?" asked Will, anxiously.

"You've got me," replied Clem. "We may be over the Caribbean or we may be above the Pacific Ocean."

"How are we heading by the compass?"

"South-east, but rather more east than south."

"That was almost the same course we were on yesterday afternoon. You can bet then that we're crossing the Caribbean and not the Pacific."

"The balloon must have lost some gas for we're lower by two hundred feet."

"You'll find that we'll rise with the sun," said Will, who had observed that phenomena the previous morning.

"We ought to strike South America soon on this course," remarked Clem.

"Sure we will if the wind don't change around and carry us in a different direction."

"We'd better not eat so much to-day, or first thing we know we won't have any provisions left. Three such healthy appetites as ours are sure to make the commissary department look sick in no time at all unless we put a curb on them."

"I agree with you that we'd better go on short allowance, for half a loaf is better than no bread at all," said Will.

"Bet your life it is."

"How long do you suppose we're going to stay up in the air?" asked Upton, who was extremely anxious to reach the solid ground once more.

"You'll have to ask me something easier than that, Upton," replied Will. "If I was a fortune teller I might possibly be able to answer your question, but as I am not it seems a matter of pot-luck when we do come down."

"Isn't there any way of making the old thing descend?" continued Upton.

"Why, yes, come to think of it, there must be a cord somewhere communicating with a valve on the top of the balloon. By pulling on the cord you open the valve which lets out the gas and the balloon will then sink."

"Where is the cord?" cried Upton, eagerly. "Let's pull it and go down."

"And land in the water and be drowned, eh? Not much.

I'm willing to stay up here as long as I see so much water in sight," said Will.

The balloon gradually rose to sixteen hundred feet as morning grew apace and the sun's rays warmed the oiled silk, and expanded the gas.

They saw nothing but water all that day, and the prospect was decidedly discouraging.

At ten o'clock that night, while they were asleep, the balloon struck the northern coast of South America, passing over a narrow strip of Colombian soil into Venezuela.

When Clem looked over the rim of the basket in the morning there wasn't a sign of water in sight.

While he didn't know it they were passing near the Venezuelan town of Truxilla.

"Land at last," he shouted to his companions.

They looked over the side of the car to see for themselves.

"It's South America for a dollar," said Will, "for we are still heading south-east, but rather more south this time than east. How high are we?"

"Little over thirteen hundred. We seem to drop lower each night."

"The gas is bound to leak out by degrees anyway," said Will.

On the previous day Clem had discovered the position of the valve cord.

It was tied to one of the guy ropes of the basket several feet beyond their reach.

As the balloon leaned in that direction none of the boys had the nerve to climb up and release it.

Now that the ground lay spread out below them they cast longing glances at the cord.

A pull upon it would send them earthbound pretty quick, and the lads were tired of their aerial journey by this time.

Their provisions were also alarmingly short.

Clem finally made an attempt to reach the valve cord, and succeeded in detaching it.

Letting some of the gas escape they dropped to an altitude of nine hundred feet.

The country looked so bare and uninviting that they decided not to descend further for the present.

When darkness came on they were still over Venezuela.

Soon after midnight the balloon crossed the boundary into Brazil, and the boys were awakened by a violent swaying of the basket.

The balloon had sunk to seven hundred feet and had been caught in a fierce windstorm that was whirling them along at the rate of nearly one hundred miles an hour.

At six o'clock in the morning they were being carried helplessly across the Madeira River, a tributary of the Amazon, which they had passed over four hours previously.

The wind now began to moderate, but still carried them along at the rate of a mile a minute.

They found that the bag was leaking gas from the rough handling it had experienced during the night, and that they were steadily dropping earthward.

"It's only a question of a little while before this trip

will come to an end," said Clem, "whether we want it to or not."

"That's what it looks like for we're only five hundred feet above sea level now. We barely passed over that line of hills yonder. We must throw over some of the sand. We'd surely starve if we alighted in this Lord-forsaken region. We must be somewhere in Brazil."

"It's a mighty poor country whatever it is," replied Clem. "Come on, help me dump out some of the sand."

They got rid of three bags of the stuff and the balloon rose up buoyantly once more to a height of one thousand feet.

They had to throw over the rest of their sand at intervals during the day to keep the balloon at a respectable height until they reached the neighborhood of a town or village.

"We must be journeying through the worst part of South America from the aspect of the country," said Clem. "We haven't seen a trace of civilization all day."

"I guess this is the central part of Brazil," replied Will, "where people are few and far between."

"We'll never get out of this valley in the balloon, that's certain," answered Clem. "You can see we're not over three hundred feet above the ground and are heading for that range yonder. The bag is getting wobbly through loss of gas, and we can't lighten it any more unless we throw Upton out," grinned the boy.

"Throw me out!" roared Upton. "I guess not."

"Then, perhaps, you'll be obliging enough to jump out so we can get over yonder mountains?" chuckled Clem.

"Why don't you jump out yourself?" snarled Upton. "We wouldn't miss you."

"Thanks for the suggestion. I'll consider it."

"If we can't pass the range in the balloon then it's a dead certainty we'll have to continue our journey on foot to the nearest town," said Will.

"That's what," replied Clem.

"And we've only got a few crackers and a little water left, with hungry stomachs to boot. This is simply fierce."

"That's right. It couldn't be much worse," admitted Clem.

"Oh, Lor', we'll starve to death in this wilderness," groaned Upton.

"Well, you can blame yourself for our troubles and your own," said Clem.

"What have I got to do with it?" growled Upton.

"If you'd got out of the balloon when the men told you to at first, instead of persuading Will to get into the basket, you two would have been at home now, while I'd probably be in New Orleans."

"Ho! Who thought this old thing would break loose like it did?"

"Nobody thought so; but you took the chances of it doing so just the same. In fifteen minutes more you can make up your mind that this balloon will be out of business, so I vote that we finish the crackers and the water, and trust to luck for our next meal," said Clem.

It took little urging for the hungry lads to carry out Clem's suggestion.

There were two crackers and a glass of water a-piece, and they finished the meager provender in a few moments.

In ten minutes the anchor at the end of the rope struck the ground of the foot hills and began to drag.

The balloon floated right into a gorge where the anchor caught in the underbrush, and their aerial flight was over for good and all.

Clem pulled on the valye rope and the car sank to the ground, the bag collapsing with a puff, and spreading itself an inert mass of silk cloth along the bushes.

"Come, fellows, step out," he said, setting the example himself.

Suddenly a dozen rough looking Brazilians dashed out of the gorge, armed with Mauser rifles and knives.

They surrounded the basket in a threatening manner, calling on the boys in Portuguese to surrender.

It was certainly a ticklish situation that the American lads faced.

CHAPTER V.

PRISONERS.

"What's the matter with you chaps?" asked Clem of a fierce looking rascal who appeared to be the leader of the crowd.

"Ha! Un Americano?" he answered, using the Spanish language.

"Yes, we're Americans all right," replied Clem, as he sat astride of the basket.

"Que dice usted? (What do you say?)"

Clem shook his head.

He didn't understand a word of Spanish.

Neither did his companions.

Nor did the Brazilians understand a word of English.

Therefore conversation was at a dead lock.

Signs became the order of the day, and the hard looking chap motioned the boys to get out of the basket.

They obeyed and were immediately seized by the gang.

The leader looked into the car and took out the instruments and blankets, handing them to a couple of his followers to carry.

Then he gave some order in Spanish and the party started up the gorge, forcing their captives to accompany them.

"It looks as if we are prisoners," said Clem to Will, who was right ahead of him. "This is as tough a lot of rascals as one could expect to run against in the wilds. I wonder what they mean to do with us?"

As Will turned to reply the Brazilian who had hold of him yanked him forward in a rough way and muttered something in his native lingo.

That put a stop to any further communication between the two boys.

Upton Fowler was the picture of woe as he was dragged forward by two of the rascals behind Clem.

The situation was clearly too strenuous for his nerves.

In this way the party proceeded over the uneven surface of the gorge until they turned a jutting rock, when they came in view of a cave before which a man fully as disreputable as the others was cooking something in a big iron pot over a fire.

Whatever was in the pot an appetizing odor was wafted to the noses of the boys, and in spite of their unenviable position it made their mouths water.

The leader made the lads sit near the mouth of the cave and placed a man to watch them, while the rest stood their weapons against the rocks and disposed themselves at their ease around on the ground.

"We're up against it hard, old man," remarked Will, turning to Clem.

"Seems so, doesn't it?" replied his chum.

"I guess these fellows are an organized gang of thieves, and this spot is their rendezvous."

"You might make a worse guess."

"They've made us prisoners for some purpose, on general principles."

"I judge they thought there might be something worth stealing in the basket of the balloon."

"In which case they've been disappointed," chuckled Will, "for those instruments won't do them any good."

"But the blankets will."

"They aren't so much. It's a wonder they haven't searched us."

"They're welcome to all they'll get on me," grinned Clem.

"They won't find a dollar's worth of coin on the three of us."

"I haven't a nickel."

"Upton takes it pretty hard, doesn't he?" said Will.

"He looks as if he was in a blue funk."

"It is very discouraging, at any rate. I'd feel a heap sight better if I had a plate full of that stuff that chap is cooking yonder. It smells good, and I feel about starved," said Will, with a wistful look in the direction of the black pot.

"Same here. Maybe we'll get a share. The cook is beginning to ladle it out. Seems to be a kind of stew."

One of the men brought a number of tin basins out of the cave, and as the cook filled them with the savory compound he passed them around among his companions, each of whom was provided with a spoon to eat with.

When all hands had been served the cook took his share, and it was a kind of exquisite torture for the hungry boys to sit and watch the stew disappear down the Brazilians' throats.

In addition to the stew each man was provided with a hunk of dark colored bread, and these two articles constituted their meal.

After the chief of the gang had finished his share he walked to the pot and looked into it.

He called for three basins and filled them.

Handing them to the cook he pointed at the boys.

"Gee! We're going to get some after all," said Will,

joyously, his tongue almost hanging out in anticipation of what was coming.

They were handed the basins, with spoons and a hunk of bread each.

The Brazilians watched the boys eat.

They must have thought the lads nigh starved from the way they devoured that stew and sour bread.

There wasn't a crumb left.

"My gracious!" cried Will, with a sigh of content. "That tasted good. I haven't had such a banquet in a week."

"Nor me in a month," replied Clem, thinking of the scanty table that Mrs. Fowler was accustomed to set.

Upton didn't say anything, but he looked as if he had enjoyed the meal as much as his associates.

"I am beginning to feel like a new man," said Clem, presently. "When a fellow's breadbasket is empty he isn't worth much."

"That's right. It takes all the ambition out of you," replied Will. "Upton looks like a different boy already."

"Say, what do you suppose these men are going to do with us?" asked Upton, with an anxious expression.

"Why don't you ask them, Uppy?" snickered Will. "Maybe you can make them understand you."

"Oh, you be jiggered!" retorted Upton, with a look of disgust. "It's a wonder you wouldn't give a straight answer when a fellow asks you a question."

"That was a silly question to ask me," replied Will. "How can I tell what these rascals mean to do with us? If I understood Portuguese——"

He didn't get any further for the leader of the crowd came up and pointing to the cave ordered the boys to go inside.

They did so, and were marched to the extreme back of the place, and directed to sit down on the hard floor.

Will happening to be in the center his right ankle was bound to Clem's left one, and his left ankle to Upton's right one.

The blankets taken from the balloon were thrown to them, and they were left to their own reflections.

The men gathered around the front of the cave, drank some kind of liquor out of a stone jug that was passed from mouth to mouth, smoked cigarettes, and chinned together in Portuguese.

"They're in no hurry to let us go," said Clem, when they had been left to themselves.

"That's evident," answered Will; "but I can't see what use they can make out of us."

"We'll know in good time. I wish I knew what part of Brazil we're in, if we really are in Brazil. It's such a big country that we may be hundreds of miles in the interior, and practically cut off from any available opportunity of escape."

"If my people don't hear from me soon they'll think I was lost in the balloon," said Will, soberly.

"That's one advantage of being an orphan," remarked Clem; "I have no one to worry about my fate."

Upton remained silent and glum.

The satisfaction he had felt at filling his stomach had passed away, and his mind was filled with gloomy pictures of the immediate future.

He lay back on his blanket, sick at heart, while the other two talked for half an hour more.

The Brazilian ruffians grouped about the entrance to the cave continued to drink and smoke for some time longer, then they drew off one at a time and wrapping themselves in their ponchos went to sleep.

The leader was the last to turn in; but previous to doing so he went to the rear of the cave and looked at the boys, now asleep.

With a grunt of satisfaction he, too, selected a spot near his sleeping companions, and soon nothing broke the silence of the Brazilian mountain cave but the deep breathing of the sleepers.

CHAPTER VI.

DIAMOND POACHING.

Soon after sunrise the boys were roughly awakened by one of the gang.

They found that the ropes had been removed from their ankles.

They were ordered in the sign language to go to the front of the cave.

The Brazilians were eating their morning meal, which consisted of a tin cup of black coffee and a cake made out of maize, with some dried fruit.

The boys were given a fair share of the food, and when breakfast was over the men lighted the customary cigarette, grabbed their rifles, and appeared to be ready to start out.

The fellow who officiated as cook appeared with a bag in his hand, and the lads being placed in front, with the leader on one side and one of the gang on the other, the procession started down the mountain gorge.

Half an hour's walk brought them to a narrow valley between two spurs of the range.

A narrow and shallow river followed the course of the valley.

At a certain spot, which showed evidences of recent excavation, the Brazilians came to a halt.

One man, with his rifle, perched himself on a high rock overlooking the entrance to the valley, while the rest, under the direction of the leader, pulled a number of shovels out of the bushes.

A spade was put into each of the boy's hands and he was ordered to get into the excavation and dig.

He was made to understand that he was to dump the dirt in a certain spot, and this dirt was afterward removed to the bank of the river and examined by some of the men.

Several of the rascals joined the boys in the wide hole and did precisely what the lads had been directed to do.

"I wonder if we're helping these fellows to dig for surface gold?" said Clem to Will, as they paused for a rest. "Almost as fast as we throw this dirt out it is carried down to the river to be washed, I suppose."

"I wouldn't be surprised," replied Will. "There has

been a great deal of gold, as well as diamonds, found in certain parts of Brazil."

"These chaps are evidently working this place on the sly. Look at that rascal on yonder rock. Anybody can see that he's there on the watch."

"Say, I'm sick of this," growled Upton, edging up toward his companions. "It is as hot as blazes in this hole, and digging is hard work. What right have these men to make us free American boys work like slaves for them? And what is it all about? What's the object of this digging? What are we hunting for?"

Upton's face wore a dissatisfied expression.

He had never been used to hard work, or work of any kind for that matter, except to wait on an occasional customer in his father's store, and this kind of thing jarred on his feelings.

"Well, Upton, you have my sympathy," grinned Clem. "There's no use of you kicking, for we're all in the same box. These ruffians have no right, of course, to make free American boys work, but might is right with them, and we've got to knuckle down until we find a chance to make our escape. As to what we're digging for, I reckon it's gold."

"Maybe it's diamonds," interjected Will, as the thought suddenly struck him.

"It's just as likely to be diamonds as gold, I suppose," admitted Clem.

"Diamonds!" exclaimed Upton, eagerly. "Do you really think so?"

"It isn't improbable," answered Clem. "Brazil is one of the countries where diamonds are dug out of the soil."

"Gee!" cried Upton. "I'm going to look for them. If I find any—"

"Well, what then?" asked Clem, coolly.

"I'll put them in my pocket, bet your life."

"You don't imagine these men are going to let you keep them, do you?"

"I shan't let any one know I've got them," said Upton, moving off to the spot where he had been shoveling out the dirt, and starting in again with renewed activity, for his interest had been aroused.

The leader of the crowd, who devoted his time to walking up and down the top edge of the excavation, keeping a sharp eye on the diggers, soon noticed that Upton, instead of throwing out shovelfuls of dirt, as before, was examining the blue clay with great attention.

He immediately jumped into the hole, gave the boy a clout alongside the head, and signed to him to continue his work.

This rough treatment put a damper on Upton's enthusiasm, and he resumed his labor with a face that looked like three days of rainy weather.

"Upton got it in the neck that time," said Clem to Will. "That chap isn't going to put up with any nonsense. It is clear we've been brought here to work, and if we don't do it to suit we'll hear from the boss of the job in a way we won't like."

At that moment Clem saw an object in the spadeful of earth he had just turned over.

He stooped down, picked it up and looked at it.

It presented the appearance of a semi-transparent rounded pebble, covered with a thin, brownish opaque crust.

Will's attention being attracted, too, he glanced at the stone.

"That's a diamond as sure as you live," he said. "It exactly answers the description I have read in books on the subject. Drop it in your pocket on the sly."

Clem was a wise boy, and without looking to see if his actions had been observed, he made a motion as if casting something aside and then went on with his digging, holding the rough diamond all the time in the palm of his hand.

After a time he put his hand in his pocket and drew out his handkerchief, letting the pebble fall into his pocket.

The leader of the ruffianly gang did not hurry the boys, as he saw they were not used to this kind of work, nor to a torrid climate.

He was, if anything, harder on Upton than the other two, because Upton shirked his labor and looked ugly and discontented.

At noon a halt was called in the work, and the man who acted as cook served out maize cakes, dried fruit and clear spring water.

After which all hands rested for over an hour in the shade.

"Are you fellows going to stand for this sort of thing?" said Upton Fowler.

"Not any longer than we can help," replied Clem.

"This kind of treatment to a free-born American is the biggest kind of an outrage," went on Upton, indignantly. "What are the Stars and Stripes good for if it isn't to protect the people of the United States?"

"Oh, choke off, Upton. What do you suppose a gang of rascals like these chaps care for the Stars and Stripes, or the flag of Brazil for that matter?" replied Clem. "There isn't any use of you or Will and me butting **our** heads against a stone wall. These scoundrels have **got us** dead to rights and we've got to knuckle down till they happen to be off their guard and then we'll cut away. Isn't that so, Will?"

"That's so," acquiesced Ashmore, nodding his head.

"Well, I'm not going to get sunstruck to oblige a lot of Brazilian bandits, not by a jugful," responded Upton, doggedly.

"If you know of any way to get the better of them let us know, and Will and I will stand by you. Otherwise I advise you to grin and bear it as best you can."

"What's the matter with sneaking up to the place where their rifles are standing against the rocks, grabbing one apiece, and standing the gang off?" said Upton.

"Have you got the nerve to attempt such a move as that?"

"I've got as much as you!" snorted Upton.

"Any fool could see that game wouldn't work," replied Clem. "At the present moment every man of them is

within reach of his gun. When we're in the excavation it would be equally out of the question. Think again, Upton, and try and strike a better idea."

"Why don't you think up some scheme yourself, you're so smart?"

"I'm on the lookout for an opening, don't you fear; and when it comes I'll be there with both feet. But I'm not going to do anything rash. That would only make a bad job worse."

Work was resumed in the excavation at two o'clock, and the boys labored with more or less persistence until near sundown, when the shovels and other paraphernalia were hidden in the bushes and the march taken up again for the cave.

The cook had preceded the party and had another pot full of stew on the fire and well under way by the time they arrived at the cave.

This programme was kept up for several days, during which time the Brazilian diamond poachers took out of the earth a couple of bags full of the rough gems, whose value, just as they stood, might be estimated at between \$8 and \$15 a carat.

By this time the hands, necks and faces of the three boys were blistered and tanned a rich brown.

They were gradually getting used to the hard work, though they didn't relish it any better than at first, when something happened that cut short their servitude to the diamond poachers.

CHAPTER VII.

A BREAK FOR FREEDOM.

It was getting on to noon of the fourth day of their work in the excavation when the boys were suddenly startled by the report of the lookout's rifle.

Instantly every man stopped his labor and ran for his gun.

The leader ordered the boys to leave the hole and pointed to a big rock behind which a couple of the diamond poachers had taken their stand.

"Looks as if there was going to be something doing," said Clem.

"This ought to be our chance to get clear of these chaps," replied Will.

"I hope so," returned Clem.

He glanced around the corner of the rock and saw a number of uniformed men in the distance advancing up the valley.

The diamond poachers were scattered at different points among the rocks, with their rifles ready to give battle to the invaders.

"Those fellows who are coming this way are soldiers, and there is quite a bunch of them. By the looks of things, somebody is going to be hurt before the scrap is over."

"Oh, Lor'!" gasped Upton. "I wish I was out of this. We may be killed."

He looked kind of white around the gills, and was clearly uneasy over the outcome.

The soldiers scattered as they advanced into the valley, and soon the poachers opened fire on them from behind boulders and other spots of vantage.

As the shooting on both sides became more lively, Clem told his companions to keep their wits on the alert and be ready to make a break.

"There's a gulley just behind us," he said. "If we can reach it we may be able to keep out of harm's way until the soldiers clean these chaps out of the valley. Then we can show ourselves and claim protection of the government men."

Clem pointed out the spot where the gulley ran.

To reach it, however, they would have to expose themselves to the fire of the military who were now well up the valley.

It was also possible that the poachers might interfere with their retreat.

The latter was hardly probable as the attention of the rascals was fully occupied with their foes in front.

"Well, what do you say, fellows?" asked Clem at last. "Shall we make a dash for the gulley now and risk a bullet or two. I think the chances of our getting hit is small. If we wait here much longer it will be different."

"What about these two rascals close by?" asked Will.

"They're not paying any attention to us," replied Clem.

"It's too risky," objected Upton, who seemed to be shaking in his shoes.

"I think it's a deal more risky to stay here. Besides, here's a chance to shake these diamond poachers. You want to get away from them, don't you?"

"Of course I do, but——"

A sudden cry from the rascal on their right interrupted him.

The fellow had incautiously exposed himself too much, and became a target for a soldier.

A Mauser bullet reached his brain and he tumbled over dead.

That incident upset the boys for a moment, and they crouched closer to the rock and gazed nervously at the dead diamond poacher.

Finally Clem pulled himself together and crawled over to the corpse.

"Where are you going, Clem?" asked Will, anxiously. His chum did not answer him.

Then Will saw Clem reach out and get possession of the man's rifle.

After securing it he unbuckled his cartridge belt and crept back to his companions.

"Come along, Will. Let's make for the gulley? This rock will cover our retreat to some extent. Get a move on, Upton."

Carrying the rifle and cartridge belt with him, Clem started to crawl toward the gulley.

Will followed close behind.

Upton hesitated and finally seeing his companions well on the way, started to join them when the other diamond

poacher discovered his object, and, giving a shout, covered him with his rifle.

Young Fowler collapsed and crept back to the shelter of the rock again.

The rascal then looked for the other two boys, but they had just vanished from his sight over the edge of the gulley, and he was unable to make out where they had gone.

The fight between the detachment of soldiers and the diamond poachers had now grown quite hot, and there were a number of casualties on both sides.

The latter stood their ground and put up a desperate resistance, and as the two parties were pretty evenly divided in numbers, the result was a matter of doubt.

Clem and Will waited for Upton to appear, but he didn't.

"What's the matter with him?" asked Clem. "Didn't he come?"

"I don't know. I supposed he was right behind me."

They glanced cautiously above the edge of the gulley and saw Upton still crouching under the rock.

"He's a blamed donkey!" cried Clem, in an impatient tone. "He hasn't spunk enough to make an effort to save himself. I don't want to stay here. My idea was to get as far away from the gang of diamond diggers as we could, and then watch for a chance to join the soldiers as soon as they succeeded in clearing these fellows out."

"They seem to be having a tough time doing it. These rascals are putting up a stiff fight. You can gamble on it they are not cowards."

"So much the more reason why we should take advantage of a chance that might not occur soon again if the poachers manage to beat the military off."

"If we wait for Upton I guess we'll stay here some time. He seems to be anchored to that rock."

"I hate to leave him in the lurch; but it's his own fault," replied Clem.

"Well, he's got a fair chance of a rescue by the soldiers if he stays where he is; but if the poachers beat them off he's bound to remain a prisoner with them."

Clem and Will finally decided to sneak off down the gulley and hide in the bushes somewhere until they discovered how the fight terminated.

It was only inviting a possible recapture to stay where they were.

Accordingly, off they set, and soon placed a quarter of a mile between them and the battle-ground.

The gulley ended at the mouth of a densely wooded ravine that ran right into the mountain range.

A narrow, swiftly flowing stream of water ran through the ravine and connected with the river, half a mile away.

"This is a fine spot to hide," said Clem, looking around. "Upton ought to be with us."

"I wonder how the fight is getting on?" said Will.

"There's a tree yonder. I'll climb it and take a squint." He started for the tree, Will following him.

Clem hadn't taken more than a dozen steps through the heavy vegetation before he suddenly disappeared right before Will's eyes.

"My gracious!" exclaimed Ashmore. "Where did he go?"

He walked forward with some caution, parting the bushes before him, and wondering how on earth it was that his companion had vanished so mysteriously.

There was no sign of Clem or how he had gone from sight.

"Clem!" called out Will. "I say, Clem! Where have you got to?"

He received no answer to his hail.

The ravine was as silent as a tomb.

"This is deuced strange," Will said to himself. "I can't see where he could have gone to in such a rapid manner. I thought he had tripped over something in the bushes, and looked to see him rise up in a moment or two. I don't like this for a cent."

He called out again to his companion, but there was no reply.

Will now began to grow alarmed.

"He certainly went down somewhere near this spot. I don't see a hole of any kind. But, then, the bushes are so thick they might cover—"

The ground suddenly gave away under his feet as he took another step forward, and down he went, out of sight, like a shot.

CHAPTER VIII.

A FORTUNE IN DIAMONDS.

The cry that rose to Will's lips was choked off by the dense mass of shrubbery that closed above his head.

He struck upon a hard, inclined plane, about six feet below and shot off, feet first, like a billiard ball from the cushion.

"Wow!" he ejaculated, with a grunt, as he fetched up somewhere down in the depths of the hillside.

"Hello, is that you, Will?" asked a voice out of the darkness.

"My goodness! Is that you, Clem?" cried Will, in glad surprise.

"Bet your life it's me; but I hardly expected to see you following me by the same route," with a chuckle.

"That was the swiftest slide I ever made in my life," replied Will.

"Yes, it was pretty swift. It could give cards and spades to some trolley lines that I've been on."

"Where do you think we're at?"

"I think we're at the bottom of a toboggan," answered Clem.

"Anybody that took the same ride on the seat of their pants that we did might easily guess that. What I want to know is where are we?"

"I should say we are some distance underground," replied his chum.

"That isn't any lie, either."

"I think you've a match-safe in your pocket," said Clem. "Get it out and light a lucifer."

Will quickly ignited a match and the boys looked around them.

The toboggan was right before them—an inclined plane of smooth slate disappearing into the darkness above at an angle of forty-five degrees.

Behind and around them was a wide, earthy cavern that looked as if it had been dug out by the hand of man.

"This must be a mine," said Will. "A diamond or a gold mine. Where diamonds are found gold almost always exists, too."

There was a lot of dried brushwood around the floor and the boys built a small fire to better illuminate the place.

It took them a matter of ten minutes to explore the presumed mine.

In a far-away corner Clem fell over some obstacle in his path.

It was a bag full of some hard stuff.

Bringing it within the circle of light cast by the fire, he examined the contents.

It was full of rough pebbles similar to the one he had found in the excavation during the first day's digging, and which Will had declared to be a diamond in the rough.

Clem dumped a pile of them out on the floor for his companion's inspection as well as his own.

Many of them showed a remarkably brilliant and iridescent surface which demonstrated their character beyond a doubt.

"Diamonds, every one of them!" cried Will, in great excitement. "There must be a fortune in that big. Gee! What a find!"

"What makes you so sure they're all diamonds?" asked Clem.

"Because I've read enough about diamond mining, and the descriptions of what diamonds in the rough look like. Those are the real article. After they have been cut and polished they'll look altogether different."

"Most of them appear to be small," said Clem. "There must be a thousand or more in that bag."

"A thousand!" ejaculated Will. "You're a poor guesser. I'll bet there's two or three thousand."

"Perhaps you can guess how much the lot is worth, too?" grinned Clem.

"In their present state they ought to average \$12 a carat. There are a hundred at least that will fetch a specially high price by themselves. Cutting and polishing will greatly reduce their size, but will proportionately increase their value."

"You never thought when you studied up the diamond that your knowledge would come in handy one day, did you?"

"That's right."

"Now, seeing you've read so much on the subject, you ought to know where the diamond districts of Brazil are."

"I do."

"Good enough. That will give us a line on where we are now."

"I imagine we're in the Province of Matto Grosso, one

of the biggest in Brazil. It borders on Bolivia on the west, and lies mostly between the 10th and 20th degrees of latitude. It is bounded on the east by the Province of Goyaz. Between Goyaz and the coast lie the provinces of Bahia and Minas Geraes. These four provinces may be called the diamond district of Brazil. The most diamonds have been found in the last two."

"We must be some distance from the coast, then?"

"I think we're in the mountains which form the dividing line between Matto Grosso and Goyaz. If so, we're all of 700 miles from the Atlantic in a direct line."

"Why do you think we're in those particular mountains, Will?"

"It is only a guess on my part, because this seems to be a prolific diamond district, judging by the contents of this bag, and more diamonds have been found in Goyaz than in Matto Grosso. I don't think the balloon carried us as far east as Bahia, nor by any means as far south as Minas Geraes."

"What puzzles me, Will, is why, if all these pebbles are real diamonds, which would make their value considerable, they should have been abandoned in this mine," said Clem.

"Don't let that fact worry you. I'm ready to swear that they're diamonds. I'm so certain of it that if the feat were possible I'd be willing to carry that bag, heavy as it is, all the way to Bahia on foot—and that would be a tramp as far, I guess, as from New York City to Chicago—on the chance of getting \$12 a carat for them."

"If we had another bag now, Will, we could divide the burden between us."

"We'll have to get one somehow, for that's too heavy to lug far."

"The first thing will be to get out of this mine."

"That oughtn't to be hard. We'll take off our shoes and walk up the toboggan to the spot where we tumbled in."

"But can we carry all these diamonds up with us?"

"I guess we'll make a pretty good effort to do it. They're worth the trouble, bet your boots. I'll do my share toward helping you get them to some place where you can realize on their value, though I don't expect you to divide up even, as you found them."

"Nonsense, Will. If we're able to carry these to a market you shall have a square half of what they bring."

"No, Clem; call it a third and I'll be satisfied. But we've got our work cut out for us to get them to Bahia, or anywhere else where we'd stand any show of selling them to advantage. We can't show ourselves to those soldiers with these diamonds in our possession, for they'd confiscate them so quick it would make our heads swim."

"I shouldn't like that for a cent."

"I should say not. It would be losing a fortune."

"But how are we to get out of this neighborhood without a guide?"

"How? Trust to luck and the sun. We must travel toward the east to reach Bahia, which is a seaport of importance, from which we can take passage back to the United States."

"And how about the important fact of eating? We haven't had a mouthful since breakfast, and I'm rather hungry."

"So am I, now that you call my attention to it. That is a rather serious problem, I must admit," said Will, making a wry face. "I didn't consider that in my calculations."

"Well, I'd give a considerable share of what I hope to get from the sale of these diamonds for a good, square meal at this moment."

"So would I."

"There must be a town, or a good-sized village, not a great way from here; the question is, how are we to find it? It is like hunting for a needle in a haystack, for at this moment we're actually lost in a wilderness. In which direction shall we strike out to find evidences of civilization?"

"You've got me, Clem. It's another case of trusting to luck."

"Well, then, let's get out of this place and make a start. The fight between the soldiers and the diamond poachers must be over by this time. Upton has either been rescued from the rascals, or he is still a prisoner. He'll have to shift for himself as far as I can see, for we have troubles enough ahead of our own."

"You can bet your life we have. By the way, where is that rifle you had?"

"I dropped it when I fell into the hole."

"I hope it isn't lost, for we're likely to need it."

"It's either at the foot of the hole or somewhere along the toboggan."

It was well along in the afternoon when, after infinite difficulty, the boys reached the top of the slippery toboggan with their bag of rough diamonds.

The rifle was found stuck in the side of the earthen wall under the hole.

Clem boosted Will up so he could clamber out into the open air again.

The rifle and then the bag of diamonds were handed up, the latter not being an easy job.

Then catching hold of Will's hands, Clem managed to scramble out of the hole himself.

There was no longer the sound of firing in the air—nature had resumed her usual quietness in that vicinity.

The boys put the bag of diamonds down in a spot where they could find it again, and went forward to reconnoiter the valley.

They advanced with due caution toward the scene of the recent conflict.

There was not a sign either of the soldiers or the diamond poachers.

The valley was, in fact, completely deserted.

When they reached the excavation they saw the shovels and other tools lying around loose, which indicated that the rascally band had been driven away from the place.

Several of the scoundrels lay stark and stiff in death on the ground.

Will quickly picked up one of the rifles and secured a cartridge belt.

While he was filling the empty holes with cartridges from other belts, Clem discovered a bag containing the few diamonds the poachers had found that morning.

Further on, behind a rock, he also made a most important find.

It was the provisions brought for the noonday meal of the gang.

Under present circumstances this was worth its weight in gold to the hungry boys.

Clem could not help announcing the discovery with a hurrah, so delighted was he.

Will ran up to see what was the matter, and he, too, felt like standing on his head out of sheer satisfaction.

The problem of eating for several days to come had been satisfactorily solved.

CHAPTER IX.

DOWN THE RIVER.

"Who says we don't eat, eh?" chuckled Will, gleefully.

"Nothing could be more fortunate," said Clem. "It pulls us out of a mighty ticklish hole."

"Oh, but I say!" cried Will, suddenly looking glum, "how are we going to carry it all with us, and the diamonds, too?"

"And the rifles, likewise," said Clem, dubiously. "That's another one of the difficulties we're up against."

"Difficulties seem to crop up on every side. I see you've got hold of another bag. We can divide the diamonds now."

"If we didn't have the diamonds to carry there would be no difficulty about the food question."

"That's true enough; but if we leave the diamonds behind we'll never see them again."

"If we only could rig up some kind of a raft we could float down the river. That would save us not only the trouble of walking, but of carrying all the stuff we want to take with us."

"That would be fine," replied Will. "The only trouble is that the river runs southward and we ought to travel eastward."

"What's the difference as long as we get away from this place? It might carry us by or near some town or village where we could make such arrangements as would enable us to travel to the coast in good shape."

"It seems to me that we'll have a high old time making arrangements with people who don't speak our language nor we theirs. How are we going to make ourselves understood?"

"We ought to find somebody in a town who can speak English," said Clem.

"Well, how about this raft matter? It suits me all right. I'd just as soon travel fifty or a hundred miles from here without tiring myself out as not. How can we build a raft stable enough to carry ourselves and our possessions?"

Where is the wood? And where the tools to construct it with?"

"We might be able to build a make-shift out of logs secured together with green vines, provided they would hold," replied Clem.

"Where are we going to find the logs?"

"Well, I can see one now down near the water."

"You'll want to see more than one before we can talk raft. I move that we have something to eat before we figure any more on the subject. We'll go down beside the river and eat, for then we'll have fresh water all ready at hand."

They selected a quantity of maize cakes and dried fruits from the diamond poachers' commissary department and marched down to the river bank.

It was a simple enough repast for two hungry boys, but they were thankful indeed to have anything to satisfy their appetites with.

They had finished their meal and were looking idly up and down the river when Will, pointing to an object a short distance away, cried out:

"What do you call that?"

Clem looked in the direction indicated by his companion.

He saw what seemed to be a small rowboat tied to the shore.

Such a discovery seemed to be too good to be true.

"Why, I call it a boat if I can see straight," he said, in some excitement. "But can it really be a boat?"

"The best way to make sure of the matter is to go and see."

That was good logic, and so they hurried toward the floating object.

To their intense satisfaction it turned out to be a small boat, partly full of water, which sank it nearly to its gunwhale.

"Another serious problem solved," said Will. "We're in great luck."

"We are if it doesn't leak too bad," replied Clem.

They pulled the boat on to the shore and dumped the water out of her.

Then they found that she did not leak at all.

There was a pair of oars fastened under the seats.

"Nothing could be better for a short cruise down the stream, eh, Will?"

"That's right. Let's put the provisions on board and then row back for the diamonds," said his companion.

They lost no time in doing this, for darkness would soon be upon them.

Will suggested that they might just as well put all the rifles in sight aboard, as they probably could sell them for provisions.

They gathered together six, besides several knives.

Then they pulled up stream to a point near the ravine, where they had left the bag of diamonds.

They divided their treasure between the two bags, keeping out a number of what they supposed to be the most

valuable of the diamonds to dispose of at the best price they could get in order to meet their expenses.

By the time they were ready to cast off and begin their voyage it was nearly dark, but the sky was brilliant with stars which would enable them to see their way down the river.

"We won't even have the trouble of rowing," said Will. "The current is swift and will carry us rapidly along without the least labor on our part."

"All aboard!" shouted Clem, as he stepped into the boat and seated himself by the tiller.

"Let her go," answered Will, as he jumped in and took possession of the seat facing his companion.

"Get out an oar and push her off into the middle of the stream," said Clem.

Will obeyed, and they were soon gliding down the river in great shape.

"Upton made the mistake of his life in not following us," remarked Will, presently. "He'd have had a share of the diamonds and been in congenial society. Now he's either with a lot of Brazilian soldiers or still in the hands of the diamond poachers. In either case I don't envy his situation."

The country they were passing through was not a cheerful-looking one.

As far as they could see in the night there wasn't a vestige of life.

The valley gradually expanded to a desolate plateau through which they floated for several hours before it took on a fertile look.

By that time Will was asleep, while Clem kept watch and guided the little craft.

When he guessed it was near midnight he awoke his companion and stretched himself out on the seats for a snooze himself.

In this way the night wore away and daylight came. They breakfasted on more maize cakes and dried fruit.

"This isn't hotel feed, but I guess it will fill the bill under the strenuous circumstances," grinned Will.

"It will fill our stomachs at any rate, and that's all that's necessary," replied Clem. "We've been having strange adventures enough to fill a book since that balloon carried us away against our will from Lakeport ten days ago."

"That's what we have," nodded Will. "If any one had told me that eventful morning that I would be in the wilds of South America in less than a week I should have laughed in his face. And yet that is what has actually taken place. It seems like a dream, doesn't it to you, Clem?"

"Call it a nightmare and you'll come nearer the mark."

"It will be a pleasant nightmare if we can carry the diamonds to a place where we can sell them at their actual value."

"Do you think we'll get \$10,000 for them as they stand?" asked Clem.

"Ten thousand dollars! What are you thinking they're

worth? I wouldn't take a cent less than \$15,000 for my half."

"There must be over 2,000 carats at that rate."

"There are over 3,000; but half of them won't bring over \$8 or \$10 a carat, as they are small. But they are gem diamonds all right, and by the looks of the bag they were all originally in they must have been dug out of the ground many years ago, when the Brazilian mines were more productive than they are to-day."

"The South African mines turn out most of the diamonds to-day, don't they, Will?" said Clem. "I read in the newspaper about a man over in London who was called the Diamond King because he controlled the business."

Will nodded.

"That lucky chap is dead now. I believe he committed suicide."

"Why? Because he was so rich he didn't know what to do with his wealth?"

"Maybe so. I think you and I could stand a good deal of that kind of prosperity without going off our base."

"What are the biggest mines in this country?"

"The Sierra de Frio, discovered in the early part of the eighteenth century. They supplied the world until the South African diamond fields came to the front."

"What was the size of the largest diamond ever found?"

"One called 'The Mogul,' found in India, and which weighed in the rough 787 1-2 carats."

"It must have been a corker. I shouldn't think any one would have had money enough to buy it."

Will didn't answer, as he was looking intently down the river.

"I think there's a village yonder, for I see smoke," he said.

Clem looked where he pointed and saw the smoke, too.

"It's around that turn in the river," he said. "No doubt we shall find a village there. This is where a knowledge of the native language would come in very handy with us now."

Will got the oars out and began to row to increase their speed.

They soon swept around the curve in the stream.

Much to their disappointment there was not the slightest sign of a village.

CHAPTER X.

IN THE HANDS OF THE MILITARY.

The boys saw that the smoke came from an encampment close to the river bank.

A number of men having the appearance of soldiers moved about in the vicinity of the fire.

"I'll bet that's the detachment that had the fight with the diamond poachers yesterday," remarked Clem.

"I guess you're right," replied Will.

Their presence on the river was presently discovered by the campers, one of whom looked at the boat through a field-glass.

This person, who seemed to be in command of the de-

tachment, made certain movements with his arm, whereupon two soldiers ran down to the bank, rifle in hand, and hailed the boys in Portuguese.

As Clem and Will didn't understand a word the men said they paid no attention to them, but allowed the boat to drift on.

Both men then raised their rifles and fired over the boys' heads.

"That seems to be a signal for us to pull ashore," said Clem.

"Very likely," replied Will, "and I think we'd better do it, for the next time they might put a ball through our bodies. Maybe they take us for a couple of the crowd they fought yesterday. I see the finish of our diamonds as far as we are concerned."

"We've got the bags stowed under the provisions so it is possible they may escape notice," answered Clem, though he had little hope of such a happy result.

The boys turned the boat toward the shore and soon reached it.

They were ordered to land.

Though the words of this command were unintelligible to them, the gestures accompanying it were perfectly plain, so they got out of the boat and were seized by the two soldiers who, without paying any attention to the boat, which drifted off a short distance and then grounded just out of sight, marched them to the encampment.

They were brought before the officer, who viewed them with a stern and forbidding countenance.

"Who are you?" he demanded in Portuguese.

Clem shook his head as an intimation that they did not understand what he said.

"Tell him we are Americans," whispered Will.

Clem did so.

"Americans, eh?" replied the officer, looking at them very hard and by no means favorably. "What are you doing out here?" he added, suspiciously.

Clem shook his head again.

"You do not understand Portuguese?" he said, in some surprise, but accompanied with a look that seemed to say that he had his doubts on the subject.

Another shake of the head from Clem.

"Search them!" commanded the officer.

The soldiers went through the boy's pockets and pulled out, among the various articles and coins the boys had in their pockets, the half dozen rough diamonds each carried.

"Aha!" exclaimed the officer, fiercely. "Diamonds, eh? You belong to that band of rascals who are giving me so much trouble. You say you do not speak Portuguese? You Americans think to pull the wool over my yes. I am no fool! You shall go to prison, I promise you. Away with them to yonder tent, and one of you stand guard over them."

The officer stroked his flowing mustache and placed the diamonds in his pocket, while the two soldiers grabbed the boys roughly by the arm and pushed them toward the tent in question.

They were shoved with little ceremony inside of the canvas folds and left to reflect upon this latest stroke of hard luck.

"Gee!" exclaimed Will, with a blank look, "we're up against it again. We've lost both our freedom and a fortune in diamonds at one blow. What are we going to do, Clem?"

"I don't see that we can do anything but grin and bear it," replied his chum.

"That officer handled us without gloves, especially when those diamonds were found in our pockets. I'll bet he takes us for members of that gang they tackled yesterday."

"I wouldn't be surprised. We're at a terrible disadvantage, not being able to talk the language of the country. It is impossible for us to make any explanation of who we are and in what a remarkable way we came into this part of South America."

"I don't believe he'd believe any statement we might make if we could talk the language. He would say that our coming here from the United States in a balloon was ridiculous."

"We could tell him where the remains of the balloon is to be found, not so many miles from here. That ought to be proof enough to bear us out."

"What's the use of talking? We couldn't get him to understand our story to save our lives. I wish to gracious we'd never gone to Lakeport to see the balloon go up. My father and mother are crazy over my disappearance by this time, and goodness knows when we'll ever get out of this country and back to Louisiana."

After a little while the boys peered out through the opening of the tent to satisfy their curiosity as to their surroundings.

There were about a dozen tents in the encampment, but they could see only half a dozen soldiers all told.

It looked as if most of the soldiers were away somewhere.

The boys finally concluded, and correctly, too, that this was not the detachment which had attacked the diamond poachers the day before, but a small section of it which had remained behind to watch the camp.

"The main body are no doubt trying to exterminate the gang before returning to camp," said Will.

"Very likely," admitted Clem. "They will probably bring back some prisoners, Upton among them, possibly. Then if the rascals only tell the truth about us we may get out of this scrape."

"What bothers me more than anything else is the loss of those diamonds," said Will, disconsolately. "I had calculated on making a good haul out of my share."

"I suppose that officer has got possession of the two bags by this time," replied Clem. "It will mean a good many dollars in his pocket."

"It's a blamed shame, so it is. We are rightfully entitled to that treasure, for we found it away down in that abandoned mine. But even if we could speak Portuguese like a native we couldn't recover those diamonds once these government chaps got their ten fingers on them."

"Well, to say the honest truth, Will, I had strong doubts about our being able to get those diamonds to any place where we might have a chance to sell them."

"It didn't take long to have your doubts realized, then," grumbled Will.

In about an hour a soldier came and marched the boys to the commander's tent.

He started to interview them again in Portuguese, evidently believing they were lying when they said they did not understand the language, for it seemed ridiculous that two boys would come away out to that province without the ability to make themselves understood.

Then, again, he argued that they must have some strong object for being in that unsettled part of Brazil—and what object could entice them to the diamond district, but the intention of digging for the gems on the quiet, which was against the law, for the government exercised a strict surveillance over the diamond industry.

The officer pointed at the dozen rough diamonds that had been taken from their pockets, and now lay on his camp table, and jabbered fiercely at the lads.

He made threats of punishment that would have made them uneasy if they had been able to translate his words, and browbeat them in every way he could, thinking to bring them to terms; but it had as little effect on them as water on a duck's back, though they could easily see that the officer was furiously angry.

Finally he gave up the effort to get anything out of them for the present, and ordered them to be taken back to the tent and bound.

Their hands were tied behind their backs and their ankles secured in the same manner.

After that it wasn't considered necessary to keep a guard over them.

Early in the afternoon they were furnished with plain black bread and water for dinner, which rations were duplicated about sundown.

"These chaps don't mean to pamper our appetites," growled Will, who didn't like prison fare for a cent.

"We won't get fat on it, that's a fact; but I've sat down to pretty nearly as rocky a meal at Mr. Fowler's on sundry occasions when Mrs. F. had a grouch on," grinned Clem. "Now look here, Will, I'm thinking that we ought to make an attempt to give these chaps the leg bail before the rest of the detachment get back. I thought the others would show up long before this."

"How are we going to do it, when we're bound like a pair of chickens ready for the market?"

"Well, I haven't been idle this afternoon. I've got a small hand, and have been working more or less steadily at my bonds for several hours past while talking to you, and now I've got the rope loose enough so that I can draw one hand out at any moment, and the other will follow as a matter of course."

"You have?" cried Will, hopefully.

"Yes. Then with my jack-knife, which that chap who searched me returned to my pocket, I could easily cut my

ankles free, and after that your bonds would come off as easy as winking."

"That's all right, but don't you suppose somebody would see us the moment we walked out through the flap door?"

"I don't propose to make the attempt until it is dark and the camp is quiet. Furthermore, my plan is not to go out the front way, as the tents face the open space where a guard probably marches up and down all night. It will be easy to slit an opening in the back of this tent and sneak that way."

"Your scheme is first-class," said Will, in some excitement. "I hope it will work."

"We must trust to luck."

"It is probable we shall find the boat down by the shore, though the diamonds are likely to be missing."

"I'm not so sure they were taken from the boat."

"Why not?"

"When we were receiving that jawing in the commander's tent I looked around for the bags, but didn't see a sign of them. Then, again, you remember he made a great how-de-do about those few stones he got from our pockets. It looks to me as if he did not suspect that we had any more in the first place."

"That's so," said Will, with a hopeful expression. "Still it seems singular that the boat was not examined. There were six rifles in it besides the cartridge belts, provisions and the diamonds."

"These Brazilian soldiers are a slouchy lot, I guess. When we stepped ashore this morning those two soldiers seized and marched us right before their officer, and never locked at the boat, nor made an attempt to secure it. I'll bet that boat floated off down the river on its own hook, and that whether we escape or not we'll never see it again."

"Gee! I hope not," replied Will, blankly. "I want to recover those diamonds."

"There are a good many things we all want in this world that we don't get just the same," answered Clem, truthfully.

The boys continued to talk until it grew dark, and then a soldier with a lantern entered the tent and in a perfunctory manner examined their bonds.

Apparently satisfied they were all right, he dragged the boys in turn to the bunk that occupied the center of the tent, and then left them in the dark.

CHAPTER XI.

THE ESCAPE.

"It looks as if this is the last visit we'll have to-night," said Clem to his companion.

"I guess so. That chap appeared to be satisfied that we would not be able to give them any trouble," replied Will.

"Then here is where we turn the tables on them," answered Clem, drawing one of his hands out of bondage, the other quickly following. "You see my hands are free, don't you?" he added, seizing Will by the arm.

"You are all to the mustard, Clem!"

"The next thing is to cut my ankles loose and then release you."

Clem put his hand in his pocket, drew out his knife, and in three minutes both boys stood up, free of their bonds.

"Now," said Clem, "go to the flap and peek out while I slit a hole in the back of the tent."

Will did so, and he saw five soldiers sitting around the camp-fire which illuminated the fronts of all the tents, while a sixth marched up and down, doing sentry duty.

"It would be impossible for us to escape from the front of this tent unnoticed in the face of that firelight and the sentinel's sharp eyes," breathed Will, as he observed the condition of things outside. "Our only chance is to crawl out by the rear way, as Clem proposed. Clem has a great head, blessed if he hasn't."

At that moment he heard his companion call to him in a low tone.

"Come on, Will. I've made a hole big enough to let a barrel through. We haven't any time to lose."

Ashmore didn't need to be told twice, but hurried over and followed Clem into the night air.

Clem got down on his hands and knees and crawled away into the darkness, followed by Will.

Lambert led their retreat around toward the commander's tent, which stood off by itself in the direction of the river.

A moment before he had seen the officer come out of his tent and walk toward the fire.

Instantly a daring, and perhaps foolish, idea had occurred to him.

He wanted to regain those dozen diamonds, which were among the best of their find, and he had seen the Brazilian officer place them in the drawer of his camp table during the interview the boys had with him.

If they were still there he was going to get them if he could.

"You go on as far as that tree yonder," he whispered to Will; "I'll be with you in a moment."

"What are you going to do?" asked his chum, in some surprise.

"No matter. Do as I tell you."

"All right," acquiesced Will, moving cautiously away, but nevertheless wondering what purpose Clem had in view.

Clem crawled up to the commander's tent, slit up a big opening in the canvas and crept inside.

A light burned on the table, which showed that the officer would no doubt be back soon.

Clem didn't lose a second but hurried up to the table, pulled open the drawer and looked in.

Sure enough, to his great satisfaction, there lay the twelve rough diamonds.

He couldn't remove them all at the first grab, but as his fingers closed over the balance the officer raised the flap of his tent to re-enter.

Clem saw the commander's figure, and the commander saw his outline bending over the table, and took the boy for one of his soldiers, who, of course, had no business to be there.

Seeing that he was caught in the act, Clem, with ad-

mirable presence of mind, overthrew the table, the lamp going with it.

For a moment the interior of the tent was shrouded in darkness, and the boy dashed for the slit in the canvas and made his escape just as the lamp exploded under the officer's bed.

The thunderstruck commander roared out a command, which drew the attention of the men about the fire to him.

They sprang to their feet and ran toward his tent, where the ignited oil from the shattered lamp had set the bed on fire.

By that time Clem dashed up alongside of Will.

"Come," he said, in an excited whisper, "we must cut it quick."

He rushed off toward the river, followed by Will.

Behind them there was a great hullaboo around the officer's burning canvas habitation.

"What's happened?" queried Will, as soon as they paused at the river bank.

"Don't bother asking questions now. The fat is in the fire and we'll be lucky to get away in safety. We must try and find our boat."

"I don't believe it's here at all," replied Will. "I told you I thought it had floated away long ago."

"Maybe it has, but I want to make sure," answered Clem.

They ran along the bank, keeping their eyes skinned for some trace of the boat.

Behind them a glare of light flashed up in the air as the fire caught on the canvas of the commander's tent and rendered all hope of saving it futile.

"By George!" cried Will, suddenly. "If there isn't the boat after all, ashore on that bit of beach."

Clem saw it almost at the same instant, and the boys made a wild break for it.

At that moment their figures were seen in the circle of light thrown by the fire, and the officer's attention called to them.

He issued a volley of orders just as the fleeing lads stepped into the boat and pushed out on the river.

A soldier rushed to the tent where the prisoners had been confined, while the others ran to get their rifles.

Clem in the meantime seized the oars and pushed as hard as he could to get over to the other bank and out of range of the firelight cast by the burning tent.

A couple of bright flashes, followed by sharp reports and the hum of a pair of bullets close to their heads, showed the boys they were still within the danger zone.

Clem pulled like a good fellow, and the boat vanished from the sight of the soldiers just as they fired again.

"Gee!" cried Will, "that was a close call. They can't reach us now unless they have a boat, and I don't believe they've got one."

"Hark!" exclaimed Clem. "They're running down the other side of the river trying to locate us for a shot. They may hear the oars, so I'm going to stop rowing and let the boat drift."

Presently several spurts of flame lit up the gloom of the

opposite bank, but the boys didn't hear the music of the bullets.

The soldiers had simply fired at random, not being able to make out the boat.

By that time the Brazilian commander's tent was reduced to ashes, and soon after a bend in the river shut out the view of the distant campfire from the boys.

There was no further sound of firing or pursuit, and Clem and Will began to breathe easier.

"Now tell me what you did, Clem, when you left me that time?" asked Will, eagerly. "Whatever it was it aroused the camp and was the cause of the officer's tent taking fire."

"Well, I made up my mind to recover those diamonds the soldiers took from us when the commander ordered us to be searched."

"You don't mean it!" gasped Will, amazed at his companion's daring.

"I do mean it, and I've got them in my pocket now."

"You have?"

"I have. Just as I got the last of them in my fist the officer suddenly re-entered his tent and caught me."

"And what did you do?"

"I overthrew the table with the lamp that stood on it. It exploded and set the tent on fire. In the confusion, we reached the boat and got the start we needed to take us out of sight of the soldiers."

"Great Scott! But you've got a cast-iron nerve to go into that officer's tent for those diamonds!"

Clem laughed a bit nervously now that the strain was over, for he began to realize that he had taken pretty desperate chances to regain those diamonds.

However, it had turned out all right, and the two boys ceased to talk about it, but turned their attention to figuring on the future.

CHAPTER XII.

CAPTURED AGAIN.

Had it been a bright starlit night, like the evening previous, the boys probably wouldn't have got out of their scrape as easily as they did.

The Brazilian soldiers would have been able to have seen them clear across the not over-wide river, and would doubtless have made their passage down the stream so warm that the lads would have had to take to the shore to escape their bullets.

The darkness of the night in that respect favored the boys, but in another it operated against them.

They intended to go down the river till they reached the neighborhood of some town, but their intention was for the time being at least frustrated by the current of the stream carrying them into a creek.

The thick gloom which hung over the face of nature that night prevented them from noticing that they had diverged from their course.

Had they been in the middle of the river this would not have occurred; but even after they lost track of the pur-

suing soldiers they kept close to the opposite bank, and so the current that swept into the creek carried the boat in with it, and until they had gone nearly half a mile, and got entangled in the shallows, they supposed they were still floating down the river.

"Say, where are we at, anyway?" asked Will, at last. "We must have got switched off the river somehow."

"Looks like it, doesn't it?" replied Clem. "There isn't two feet of water here," he added, feeling around with an oar.

"Seems to be a lot of rank vegetation around us, too," said Will.

"We'll either have to turn around and try to get back to the river again or stay here till morning, when we'll be able to get a true line on our position once more."

"How far do you think we're below that camp?" inquired Will.

"I haven't any idea; but it must be several miles."

"Do you think those chaps will pursue us in the morning?"

"I wouldn't be at all surprised but they will."

"Then if we kept to the river they would probably head us off in the course of the day."

"If they followed us long enough I think they would."

"Then we'd better stay where we are, don't you think?"

"I think we had until daylight."

"Then the best thing we can do is to go ashore and have a good night's rest in the shrubbery. I'm sore from lying across the seats last night."

Clem thought Will's suggestion good, and they decided to adopt it.

They tied the boat to a stone, found a soft roosting spot near at hand and ere long were sleeping soundly.

The sun was well up when they awoke.

Emerging from the bushes Will called Clem's attention to a house about a mile away, and to ground that seemed to be in a state of cultivation.

"Looks as if we may be reaching civilization at last," he said.

"You can't tell. This may be an isolated habitation."

"If I could talk the lingo of the country I'd go over to that dwelling and find out where we are."

"It is a great world, isn't it?" grinned Clem. "If it's all the same to you, we'll sample those provisions in the boat, for I feel starved out after that bread-and-water diet we had yesterday."

Ashmore was more than willing to eat, and so the boys breakfasted.

"Now," said Clem, when they were through, "as it's more than likely we'll have to do some walking before long, I vote that we try and reduce the burden we've got to carry."

"In what way?"

"Well, I think we'd better sort over the diamonds and keep only the biggest ones—those that will pan out at least a carat after cutting. We've a lot of good-sized stones in the bag that ought to be worth a handful of the

small ones. These should bring us a good price as they stand. I think we can afford to throw out all the very small ones in order to increase our chances of saving the really good ones."

"But the smallest we've got will fetch \$8 a carat at least. It's like throwing away so much good money," objected Will.

Finally, after some argument on the subject, the stones were sorted over and 300 very small specimens were thrown out.

"This is evidently a creek we wandered into last night in the dark," said Will, looking at the narrow watercourse at the head of which the boat lay.

"Yes, I guess it's a creek, all right," acquiesced Clem. "Hello, here's somebody coming this way from the direction of the river. Blessed if it doesn't look like Upton. I wonder if it really can be him?"

They watched the slow and toilsome approach of the newcomer with some interest, until the fact became evident to them that it actually was Upton Fowler who was drawing near.

"Well, he certainly looks as if he'd been up against an extra slice of hard luck since we saw him last," said Will.

"That's what he does. He seems hardly able to draw one leg after another."

Upton did not notice them until he got quite near, and then not until Ashmore hailed him.

He stopped and stared at them as if he couldn't believe his eyes, then he made a dash forward and tumbled down in a heap at their feet.

They soon found out that Upton was almost starved, and they set before him as much of their provisions as he could eat.

Then he told them that the diamond poachers had finally been dislodged from their advantageous position among the rocks and driven off out of the valley, the soldiers pursuing them.

That he had finally mustered up courage enough to seek shelter in the gully.

After the fight he had wandered about the valley, hunting for his associates, but could not find any trace of them.

Finally he started down the river to try and find a house.

He had been unsuccessful until this morning, when he caught sight of the house Will had noticed an hour before.

He had had nothing to eat in forty-eight hours but some wild berries, and was about done up.

"Well, you look it, Upton," said Will.

"Is that your boat?" asked Upton. "Where did you get it?"

"Just you listen and I'll tell you what we've been through since we lost you."

"While you're telling it, Will," said Clem, "I'll walk over to that house and see if I can secure a fresh supply of eatables. Now that there's three of us again, what we have won't last long."

He picked up a handful of the small diamonds they had cast aside, put them in his pocket and started off, while

Will began to entertain Upton with an account of the adventures Clem and himself had experienced since they parted company with him during the fight between the soldiers and the diamond poachers.

For reasons, he suppressed the fact of their discovery of the bag of rough diamonds in the deserted mine, merely stating how they had slipped down the slate toboggan and afterward made their exit from the hole by the way they had got in.

Clem, in the meanwhile, proceeded on to the distant house, wondering how he would be able to make his wants known.

The necessity of procuring a fresh supply of provisions, however, urged him to make the best effort he could to accomplish that end.

He approached the rear of the house as being the most likely place where he might expect to find some member of the family at that hour.

Smoke was ascending from the chimney of a one-story addition, which he judged to be the kitchen, and consequently he guessed that breakfast was under way.

He was within a few yards of the door when suddenly the shrill scream of a woman broke upon the still air.

The scream was repeated in such a tone as seemed to indicate that the person was in trouble.

"Good gracious!" exclaimed Clem. "What can be the matter?"

He dashed forward with the intention of lending his aid if that was necessary.

The scream was a third time repeated, and it came from a room just ahead of the kitchen annex.

Clem didn't stand on ceremony about entering the house under the circumstances.

He sprang through the kitchen door, crossed the room at a bound, and, clearing the adjoining entry in no time, at all, appeared at the door of the room beyond.

Here a table was spread with dishes and eatables at which two men were seated, while a third was struggling with a young and pretty girl, who was trying to beat him off.

He had his arms around her and was trying to kiss her against her will, his companions looking on and enjoying the contest.

The girl was strong and active, but no match for the fellow who had hold of her, and whose actions showed that he was somewhat tipsy.

It was clear that she didn't intend to be kissed by her assailant if she could help herself, but the chances were all in his favor.

Clem, who was a natural champion of any woman displaying signals of distress, without thinking of the consequences of butting in where one party at least objected, jumped across the room and struck the man a staggering blow in the face.

He released his hold on the girl and fell back, while she, taking advantage of the moment, fled out of his reach into the kitchen, and thence to the yard.

Clem's cyclonic entry and vigorous aggressiveness produced something of a sensation in the room, and the three men stared at him in angry astonishment.

It was then for the first time that the boy noticed they were attired in the garb of soldiers.

"What do you mean, you rascal, by abusing that girl?" cried Clem, forgetting in his excitement that he was addressing people to whom the English language was as intelligible as the Chinese jargon.

His voice broke the spell.

"By thunder!" exclaimed one of the soldiers, in Portuguese, springing to his feet, "this is one of those boys we're after. Grab him!"

Before Clem had quite grasped the situation the three men were upon him, and, in spite of a vigorous resistance on his part, he was overthrown and his hands bound with a leather strap.

CHAPTER XIII.

TRICKING THE ENEMY.

Clem was pulled on his feet and forced into a chair in a corner, while the men returned to the table to finish their interrupted meal.

The boy now had an opportunity to realize that he had inadvertently placed himself in the hands of his enemies—soldiers who he guessed had been sent out to cut off the escape of himself and his companion.

He noticed that they occasionally bestowed triumphant and malicious glances on him as they hurried down their food in their eagerness to start out after the other escaped prisoner, whom they naturally judged to be hiding in that vicinity.

The girl did not show up near the house again while the soldiers were eating.

As far as Clem could see, no other member of the family that lived there was about the place.

The men at length rose from the table and prepared to go in search of their prisoner's companion—at least two of them were to undertake that cheerful duty while the third, the half tipsy chap, was to remain and guard Clem.

In order to make sure of their prisoner, they got a rope and tied him to the chair.

Then the sober pair took up their rifles and departed on their mission.

The partly intoxicated soldier sat in front of Clem with his rifle across his knee, and amused himself telling the boy in Portuguese what he might expect in the way of punishment for his escape of the night before.

As Clem didn't understand a word he said, the terrors of his conversation were quite lost on the boy.

Fifteen minutes passed in this way and then Clem, who was facing the open window, saw the girl's face appear at the opening.

The soldier's back was toward her, and consequently he did not know she was there.

Clem looked at her, and she at Clem, but the boy made no move to betray her presence.

Finally she appeared to understand the situation in the room, and then placing her finger on her lips, and smiling at the boy, she disappeared.

Ten minutes passed away, during which Clem wondered whether the girl really intended to help him out of his scrape, and then she suddenly appeared at the door of the room.

Tiptoeing toward the Brazilian guard, who appeared to be unconscious of her presence, she reached the back of his chair.

Raising her arm quickly she dashed a handful of fine cinnamon dust into his face.

The soldier screamed out with pain and staggered to his feet.

His rifle clattered to the floor, the chair fell over, while the stricken man, swearing and crying out in Portuguese, groped for the door.

The girl, without a word, seized a knife from the table, quickly cut Clem's bonds and pointed at the window.

The boy seized both her hands gratefully in his and pressed them fervently.

Then he started for the window.

But he made no attempt to get out, for at that moment he heard the sound of voices and approaching feet, and a rapid glance showed him the two soldiers returning to the house with Will and Upton in their custody.

The two boys had been discovered and caught off their guard at the creek, and became easy victims.

The men had only expected to find one boy, and the presence of two rather astonished them.

However, they wasted no time figuring the matter out, but took charge of both.

Clem, perceiving that escape by the window seemed to be out of the question, looked hurriedly around for some other means of making himself scarce.

The girl, who had also become aware of the return of the tipsy soldier's companions, showed by her countenance that she was not a little alarmed thereat.

She motioned to a closed door on one side of the room, and then ran into the entry, from which she escaped by a door opening on the opposite side of the house.

Clem understood the girl's pantomime.

He jumped for the door, opened it and found himself in a broad hallway with a stairway before him.

The stairs instantly suggested to him a method of operations.

It is true he did not have time to elaborate the plan, and fully determine what he should do when he went upstairs; but the general idea that he could drop out of a window and escape from the other side of the house struck him forcibly, and he impulsively embraced the opportunity thus presented.

The building he found was a very ordinary rural dwelling, of two stories, with a sloping roof.

It was rudely constructed, and very imperfectly finished.

On ascending the stairs, Clem reached a large, unfinished apartment, which was used as a storeroom.

From it opened other rooms, the doors of which were closed.

As Clem cautiously threw up one of the windows he heard the voices of the returned soldiers raised in great excitement.

They had discovered their comrade washing out his eyes at the kitchen sink, and showing every evidence of extreme pain.

They could get no intelligible explanation from him, and fearing their prisoner was at the bottom of it, and had in some way managed to free himself, one of them rushed into the eating-room to find their suspicions realized.

Afraid that he might be seen by the soldiers from one of the windows below deterred Clem from adopting his first idea of escape, and he looked around the room for some nook in which to hide.

No place of concealment, which was apparently suitable for his purpose, presented itself; and, without loss of time, he mounted a large chest and ascended to the loft above, for the beams were not floored in the middle of the house.

The ascent of the loft was not at all hopeful.

There were none of those convenient cubby holes which American houses contain, wherein he could squeeze himself with any hope of escaping notice from the watchful eyes of a searcher who might take it upon himself to investigate that part of the building.

There were two small windows in the loft, both without sashes, which had been boarded up to exclude the wind and the rain.

This job on the one nearest to where Clem stood had been done by a bungling hand, and had never been more than half done.

The wood was as rotten as punk, and without difficulty, and without much noise, the boy succeeded in removing the board which had covered the lower part of the opening.

Clem stuck his head out to reconnoiter the roof, and found his nose within a few inches of a wide chimney which was built on the outside of the dwelling.

The idea at once struck him that if he could get to the top of that chimney he could lower himself inside, out of sight, and thus effectually outwit the enemy.

The only objection to this course was that he might slip all the way down inside the chimney and reappear in an open fireplace below before the coast was clear.

To reach the top of the chimney from the small window was, he saw, rather a difficult piece of gymnastics.

Still the thing was possible, and the urgency of the occasion fully warranted the risk he would have to face.

While he was considering the problem he heard sounds on the stairs below which convinced him that a search of the house had been begun, and therefore it behooved him to get a move on if he expected to save himself.

Clem was as agile as a young monkey, and his muscles were strong as steel.

He climbed out of the window, and, supporting himself by a narrow stone projection that ran all the way around the house, he caught hold of the rim of the roof.

Testing the stability of this, and judging that it would easily bear his weight, he pulled himself up by his arms alone, and then by a quick and successful cast of one leg, secured a precarious hold on the roof.

Then he moved slowly and cautiously till he reached the chimney, against which he braced his left elbow and scrambled wholly upon the roof.

The manœuvre so far was successful—all that now remained was to insert himself into the chimney, and he proceeded to do this without loss of time.

CHAPTER XIV.

A FIRE ALARM.

As Clem sat for a moment or two on the top of the chimney, with his legs down the flue, he glanced about upon the sunshiny landscape.

Nearly a mile away he could detect the serpentine course of the river.

The creek, too, up which they had blundered during the night, was right under his eye, with their boat tied at the head of it.

There were fields around the house in various degrees of cultivation, and outhouses, several horses in a pasture, and other evidences that this was a small Brazilian farm, but singular to say there was no sign of men folks about the place.

Around the corner of a nearby outhouse he saw the girl standing.

Whether she saw him in that airy height or not he could not say, but she seemed to be looking directly at him.

Clem allowed his body to slide down into the chimney as far as his arm-pits, and with his head exposed he waited calmly for his enemies to get tired of looking for him.

He wished he could think of some plan by which he could rescue Will and Upton from the soldiers below, as well as get off himself, but he could hit upon nothing that promised the slightest degree of success.

While he was pondering upon their critical situation he heard sounds close by just below him.

"Can it be that one of the soldiers has surmised how I made my escape from the inside of the building, and is trying to trap me in the chimney?" he asked himself.

He pulled himself up a little and looked cautiously down at the window through which he had gained the roof.

His suspicions proved true.

The Brazilian had noticed the removal of the board from the window, and had seen the boy's track in the dust, and he believed their prisoner was somewhere on the roof.

The noise Clem noticed was his efforts to swing himself up on the coping so that he could see if the boy was on top of the house.

Discovery appeared to be certain unless Clem dodged entirely out of sight, and descended far enough in the darkness of the chimney to prevent his being seen.

He essayed to do this before it became too late.

But chimney locomotion had not been a part of Clem's education, and he found it an extremely difficult matter to

brace his knees in such a scientific manner as to maintain a secure hold on the bricks which were wholly free of soot, or any projections that might have aided him.

The result was that as soon as he released his grip on the top of the chimney he began to slip right down, and it was only by the most desperate efforts that he prevented his descent from becoming an absolute fall.

Down he went, sometimes a foot at a time and sometimes a whole yard or more.

His jacket and trousers suffered greatly from contact with the bricks.

It was dark as pitch in the narrow verticle tunnel, and only by glancing up at the opening at the top could he form any idea of how far down he was.

Finally his feet came in contact with the bottom, and then he wondered where the fireplace was.

By tapping around with his fist he found that the opening was closed by a board screen.

He pushed on it and one side gave away.

Glancing through the crack he found himself looking into a fairly well furnished room, probably the best in the house.

Exerting some strength he moved the screen far enough to enable him to step out of the wide chimney.

He walked over to one of the doors, opened it cautiously and saw the hall and the stairway up which he had beat his retreat at the first alarm.

"I might get the best of these rascals by a bold move," he thought. "There are only three of them all told. One I guess is out of business—the chap that caught the red dust in his eyes. A second is now on the roof, or trying to reach it. That leaves only one able-bodied fellow to be reckoned with. Nothing ventured nothing gained. I'll see what I can do to help both my companions and myself to give these fellows the slip."

He crossed the hall and listened at the door opening upon the eating-room.

He heard Will and Upton talking together.

Slowly he opened the door and poked his head in.

There sat his companions each tied to a chair with their backs to him.

He heard the voices of the two soldiers in the kitchen, the entry door being wide open.

Making up his mind what to do he walked into the room and showed himself suddenly to Will and Upton, holding up his hand for silence.

With the same knife that the girl had used to liberate him he cut the boys loose.

The soldiers' rifles stood piled against a chair.

Clem silently pointed at them, and each took possession of one.

Then he led the way to the open window and lowered himself outside.

Will and Upton followed in turn.

Clem led them around to the front of the house.

"Where have you been hiding, Clem?" asked Will.

"I went to the roof, and discovering that I was followed I came down through the big chimney," he answered.

"Yon don't say. Well, your clothes look as if you'd been through a mill," said Will. "You're a regular wreck."

"What's the odds so long as we get off."

"We ought to be able to do that for we have their rifles."

"Oh, we'll get away all right, but I'd like to do so without attracting their attention. One of the soldiers is on the roof at this moment. He'd see us the moment we walked away from the house."

"Well, he couldn't stop us," said Will.

"Wait here till I take a look."

Clem backed away from the building, with his eyes cast aloft.

He saw the soldier lowering himself back to the window in the loft.

He watched him till he saw him disappear inside, and then motioning to his companions to follow he made a break for the outhouse where he had seen the girl standing a short time before.

As he turned the corner he saw her peering around the other corner.

He called out to her, and she sprang around with a stifled scream, which turned to a glad cry when she recognized him.

"Ah!" she cried, running toward him with outstretched hands.

Then she stopped and blushed.

At that moment Will and Upton joined Clem.

"Gee!" exclaimed Will. "A girl! Isn't she a beaut?"

"You are Americans, are you not?" cried the girl, in perfect English, her eyes lighting up with pleasure, for she had caught Will's words.

"That's what we are," replied Clem, with a thrill of joy on hearing his native language spoken by an inhabitant of that wild district.

"I am so glad that you succeeded in making your escape from the house," she replied, earnestly. "I saw you climb to the roof and get in the chimney. Then I saw one of the soldiers come to the attic window, and from the way he acted I was sure he suspected where you were. You must have let yourself down the chimney."

"I look like it, don't I?" grinned Clem.

"You do, indeed," she answered with a smile. "But I wonder what those men are doing now? I do wish they'd leave the place. When my father learns of their conduct he will certainly report them to their commander. They behaved with the utmost rudeness to me because I happened to be alone here this morning, and if you had not appeared when you did, I believe that nasty brute would have kissed me. I am deeply grateful to you, and sorry that you have suffered for your courage and gallantry."

"Don't mention it," said Clem. "I am glad I was able to do you a service Miss——" he paused and looked at her inquiringly.

"My name is Estelle Wheeler."

"Thank you, and my name is Clem Lambert. This is my chum, Will Ashmore, and this is Upton Fowler."

The girl acknowledged the introductions with a smile.

Then she tripped to the corner of the shed and peered around at the house.

A dense volume of smoke was rolling out of the kitchen window.

"Oh, my gracious!" she cried in great alarm, "I believe they've set fire to our house."

The boys looked and saw the smoke which suggested direful results for the Wheeler home.

"Come on, fellows!" cried Clem, in great excitement, "we must save the house if it is possible for us to do so."

CHAPTER XV.

A SQUARE MEAL AT LAST.

The three boys, followed by Estelle Wheeler, left the shelter of the outhouse and started for the dwelling on the run.

They held their rifles in readiness to make a demonstration against the uniformed rascals who had been acting in such a high-handed manner.

The fellows, however, were seen retreating up the road in the direction of the encampment, which they expected to regain by means of a boat they had left somewhere along the river bank.

They had been greatly enraged on discovering that their two prisoners had been released from their bonds and that their guns had disappeared, too.

They believed the girl of the house responsible for the loss of their prisoners, and their rifles, and in revenge they set fire to the kitchen.

Casting the guns aside the boys formed themselves into a volunteer fire department.

Buckets were seized, carried to a bubbling spring close at hand, and rushed to the burning kitchen on the run, while the girl watched their exertions with the deepest anxiety.

Fortunately, the soldiers in their hurry had not made a very good job of their incendiary attempt.

They had ignited a lot of brushwood, over which a bucket of water had been accidentally spilled that morning, and the greater part of the wood was damp, and produced more smoke than flame.

For all that, however, the fire would have soon accomplished its purpose but for the prompt action of Clem and his companions.

They worked like Trojans for fifteen minutes and succeeded in subduing the flames before they had done any very serious damage.

As soon as the fire was out they cleaned up the kitchen so that nothing remained to indicate the peril the house had been in, but a few charred beams.

Miss Wheeler expressed her gratitude in profuse terms.

"You mustn't go away until you see my father," she said. "He will return before dark. He is overseer of the Rio Esmeralda diamond mine, twelve miles to the north."

"We'll be very glad to meet your father, who is an Ameri-

can, I should judge, from his name," said Clem, while they were all resting from their recent labors.

"Yes, my father is a Californian, though my mother is a native of Brazil," answered Miss Wheeler. "I was born in San Francisco myself, so I may claim to be as much of an American as my father."

"How is it that you happen to be alone on this place?" asked Clem, with some curiosity.

"Well, my father went to the mine as usual at six o'clock. My mother is away on a visit to her relatives in Rio de Janeiro, and our two hands went to the town of Juarrez, nine miles away, for some supplies."

"But are not you afraid to remain here all by yourself?"

"Not in the least, for I expect our men back by noon, and we seldom have undesirable visitors, notwithstanding the fact that the mountains yonder harbor many lawless men. This is the first time since we have lived here that soldiers have intruded upon us. Those three came soon after our men started for town. They demanded breakfast, and I prepared it for them. I gathered from their conversation, for I understand the Portuguese language perfectly, that they were hunting for two prisoners who escaped last night from their camp on the other side of the river."

"That's right," said Clem, with a grin; "they were looking for me and my friend Will Ashmore."

"Looking for you!" cried the girl, in astonishment. "You do not mean—"

"That we are the prisoners who escaped from their camp? That's just what I do mean, Miss Wheeler. But I will tell you our story after I hear the rest of yours. Ours is a most extraordinary narrative, as you will have to admit when you hear it. Go on."

"Well, I am sure I shall be glad to learn what errand brought you so far into Brazil as the Province of Goyaz."

"Oh, then that's where we are, is it?"

"Why don't you know that?" she asked, opening her pretty eyes.

"I am sorry to say we did not until you told us."

Miss Wheeler seemed to think his professed ignorance most extraordinary, and but for their honest appearance and the obligations she was under to Clem and his companions, she would have had strange suspicions concerning them.

"Well," she continued, "as soon as those soldiers discovered that I was quite alone in the house they began to get very rude toward me. I resented their rough jests, and told them they ought to be thankful that I put myself out to get breakfast for hem. Thereupon they all laughed very boisterously, and the one who was not quite sober declared I ought to consider their visit an honor. Then he rose to his feet and grabbed me, saying he made it a point of honor to kiss every pretty girl he met. Finding I could not escape, I screamed, though I did not expect any one to come to my aid. Fortunately for me you were near, Mr. Lambert, and I never can thank you too much for interfering in my behalf," she said, blushingly.

"I also owe you thanks for rescuing me from the clutches of those rascals when they had me bound and under guard in your dining-room," said Clem.

"Could I do less when I was the cause of your misfortune?" she replied.

"Only the partial cause, Miss Wheeler. As I said before those chaps were after me and my companion. Now that you have finished I will tell you our story. We three boys didn't come to South America because we wanted to, we came here because we couldn't help ourselves."

"Why, how was that?" she asked, in some wonder.

"Listen and you will hear."

Thereupon Clem related their adventures from the moment the balloon carried them off from Lakeport, Louisiana, until they reached the creek below the house on the preceding night, omitting, however, their discovery of the diamonds in the mine.

The girl frequently interrupted his narrative with exclamations of astonishment.

"Well," she almost gasped, when he had finished his story, "this sounds more wonderful than anything I ever read in a book. And you boys haven't had a real good meal since you left home, two weeks ago?"

"I regret to say we have not. I'll wager we three could clean out a small restaurant at this moment."

"Then you shall have a good meal, and as much as you can eat, just as soon as I can cook it for you!" she cried, springing to her feet.

"Thank you, Miss Wheeler," replied Clem, "we couldn't refuse so generous an offer on your part. If there is anything we can do to help the good work along let us know."

"You can draw some water and bring in some wood for the fire. Then you may peel a few potatoes and—I guess that will be all."

"I'll go for the water. You get the wood, Will. And you tackle the potatoes, Upton, and be sure you don't forget yourself and gobble one or two of them down raw."

As soon as the wood and water was brought into the kitchen, Clem proposed to Will to pay a visit to the boat and remove the bags of diamonds to the house.

His companion was only too eager to do this, and they brought up also the discarded stones, thinking they might be able to save them after all.

"I'll tell you what we'll do with them," said Will. "We'll give them to Upton. I'll bet they're worth over \$1,000."

"All right," agreed Clem. "He ought to have a small share in our prosperity, though he is not really entitled to anything by any right."

They carried the bags to the house and put them, for the time being, in one of the dining-room closets.

The boys gathered in the kitchen and watched the broiling of a pair of chickens with eager interest and anticipation.

They kept up a continual flow of talk, and among other things learned that the Wheelers had only been living in the province for about a year.

The house was the best one they had been able to obtain within a reasonable distance of the Rio Esmeralda mine.

At the best it was but a poor habitation, much out of repair and run to seed, but it answered their purpose for the time Mr. Wheeler expected to remain in the diamond diggings of Goyaz.

The boys' appetites were on edge by the time Estelle summoned them to the table, and the way they sailed into that meal almost made her die laughing.

"Don't mind me," she said. "Eat all you want, for you certainly are half starved."

And they didn't mind her in the least, for when they declared themselves satisfied there wasn't enough left to feed a canary bird.

CHAPTER XVI.

BESIEGED.

About the time the boys had finished their dinner the two men belonging to the farm returned with a wagon load of various boxes and packages.

Half an hour later a boat came up the creek and landed a corporal with six soldiers, who immediately marched toward the house.

Miss Wheeler was entertaining her young guests on the front veranda when Clem noticed the approach of the military.

"Hello!" he exclaimed, jumping to his feet, "Here comes a file of soldiers. I guess there's no doubt but they're after us."

Will looked anxious and Upton frightened.

"No use trying to beat those chaps off," remarked Will. "I guess we'd better take to the woods."

He used the expression in its figurative sense, for there was no woods within sight of the Wheeler home.

"I think you boys had better get out of sight until I can explain matters to the officer in charge of these men," said Estelle. "If my father was here there would be no trouble, for he is well acquainted with the commandant of the soldiers who patrol this district."

"Well, we don't propose to be taken back to that camp up river if we can help ourselves," said Clem in a determined tone. "We can't speak a word of Portuguese, and would only be in the same hole we were before, and a good deal worse, if anything, for no doubt that officer will try to get square with us for the burning of his tent. If you can't stand them off with fair words, Miss Wheeler, we'll try and stand them off with our rifles until your father gets back."

The boys, with a rifle and cartridge belt apiece, retreated to a small stone outbuilding about five hundred yards away, and securing the door mounted to the left where they ensconced themselves beside a single small window that commanded the approach from the house.

"Those chaps will get all that's coming to them if they try to capture us," said Clem, with fight exhibited in every line of his manly face. "We haven't broken any laws, or done anything at all to be treated in the rough way we have."

Somebody is going to get into trouble over this matter yet, and it won't be us if I have anything to say."

"That's right," agreed Will. "I'm with you every time, bet your boots."

"I hope there won't be any shooting," said Upton, nervously.

"We're not looking for trouble," answered Clem; "but if it comes I hope you'll do your share to see us through."

"Are you going to fire on these men?" asked Upton, apprehensively.

"I hope there'll be no necessity for such a thing," replied Clem. "But I've stood all the nonsense I'm going to from these Brazilian soldiers, and I guess Will has, too. If they try to capture us I shall resist to the last, even if I have to shoot one or two of them."

Will nodded approval of his chum's remarks, and Upton saw that they meant business.

Through the window they saw the file of soldiers drawn up in front of the house and the corporal talking to Miss Wheeler.

The conversation was carried on for fully fifteen minutes, at the end of which the officer and two men entered the building while the rest took up positions that commanded all exits from the dwelling.

"They're going to search the house," said Clem. "Miss Wheeler's arguments evidently had no effect. Well, I reckon they'll have their trouble for nothing."

"There goes Miss Wheeler towards the barn," said Will.

"And one of the soldiers is watching her," interjected Upton.

"She has called out one of the hands and is speaking to him," remarked Clem.

The girl was soon seen returning to the house while the farmhand went into the barn, got a short noosed rope and went into the pasture where the horses were grazing.

He caught one, brought it to the barn, saddled it, and jumping on its back rode off at top speed for the distant mountains.

"I'll bet Miss Wheeler has sent for her father," said Clem, as they watched the rider disappear up the road.

The boys agreed that that was what the girl had done.

Fifteen minutes later the corporal and his satellites came out of the house, apparently satisfied the lads they were after were not hidden in the building.

Leaving two men near the house he marched the other four over to the barn, which he surrounded, and taking one man with him entered to search it.

The search, as a matter of course, amounted to nothing.

From the barn the corporal and his men visited the other outhouses, and finally directed their steps toward the one in which the boys were concealed.

"We're in for it now," said Clem, picking up his rifle and cocking it.

Will followed his example, and so did Upton, though it was clear that he had no heart in the prospect of a scrimmage.

The corporal found the door fastened on the inside, and he ordered his soldiers to force it in, which they did.

Then after glancing around below they came up the heavy steps that communicated with the loft.

Here they found their progress barred by the trap-door over which the boys had drawn a heavy feed chest.

The soldiers banged away on the trap with the butts of their rifles, but could make no impression on it.

The corporal was now satisfied that he had discovered the hiding place of the boys.

Finding that the trap-door was impregnable they retreated outside.

Then one of the soldiers, mounting on the shoulders of another, essayed to enter the loft by the single narrow window.

Finding that he couldn't scramble up, a third soldier was sent to the barn for a ladder, while the rest awaited his return.

"They're going to storm our fortress with a scaling ladder," said Clem. "As only one can come up at a time, and the window is too narrow to let him through, I don't think they'll accomplish much. That officer is a chump."

The ladder was brought up and a soldier ordered up.

The boys lined up on either side of the window, hugging the thick stone wall closely.

The soldier stuck his head in through the aperture, but he couldn't get it far enough in to see more than two-thirds of the interior of the loft.

He saw the grain chest on top of the trapdoor, but he couldn't see the boys.

He tried in every way to squirm his shoulders in, but it was no go.

Then he retired to the ground to report to the corporal.

The officer then essayed the feat himself, but was not a bit more successful.

He threatened the fugitives in Portuguese with various penalties if they did not surrender, but received no reply.

He retired discomfited and began to consider what he should do next to accomplish his purpose.

At this point Miss Wheeler appeared on the scene and renewed her expostulations without success.

The corporal was very polite to her, but refused to listen to her objections.

Finally he thought of a scheme to drive the boys from their retreat—he would smoke them out.

So he sent to the barn for a quantity of hay and a couple of buckets of water.

"What are they going to do? Burn us out?" asked Will, anxiously, when they saw the men coming back with the hay.

"They'll have a good time trying to burn this stone building down," said Upton.

"They can set fire to the stairs, and the floor of this loft; but it's my opinion he intends to smoke us out," replied Clem, who thought he saw through the corporal's scheme.

"Then we can see our finish, I guess," replied Will, glumly.

"And some of them are likely to see their finish," answered Clem.

"What are you going to do? Shoot?"

"Yes. We'll move the chest and open the trap. The chap who attempts to fire that hay will get a bullet."

Matters seemed to be getting serious.

Miss Wheeler put up another stiff kick when she saw the preparations that the soldiers were making, but it didn't do any good.

Will had been casting his eyes around the loft to see if there wasn't some way of getting out besides the window and the trap.

He spied a big hinged flap in the side of the roof which sloped to the rear.

"Say," he said, eagerly. "Look at that trap in the roof. Couldn't we give the soldiers the slip through that? They are all engaged in front. We might sneak out that way, drop to the ground and escape before they got on."

"A good scheme," agreed Clem.

He went and examined the flap.

He saw there was a pole for pushing it up and keeping it open to admit the sunshine to the loft.

He pushed it up and looked out.

The rear of the building was not watched.

"Come on, fellows, we'll risk it."

Silently they passed through the opening and dropped noiselessly to the ground, carrying their rifles with them.

The fire had been started inside the outhouse, and as the soldiers threw wet straw on the flames a dense smoke arose and began to work through the cracks into the loft.

The corporal grinned and rubbed his hands together.

He was sure the boys would have to give in now.

But that was where he got badly left.

CHAPTER XVII.

CONCLUSION.

Pretty soon the smoke began to rise above the roof in suspiciously large proportions, and still no move had been made by the boys to give in.

The corporal went around to the rear to see why so much smoke came out there, and the wide open flap greeted his astonished eyes.

This trap had been shut when he first reconnoitered the outhouse.

He immediately jumped to the conclusion that the boys had opened the trap to let the smoke escape.

He ordered the fire to be put out at once and the ladder to be brought around to the rear.

As soon as the smoke began to die away, he and two soldiers mounted the ladder and sprang down into the loft.

To the corporal's astonishment and chagrin there was no sign of the boys.

Then it occurred to his dull brain that the fugitives had made their escape through the flap while he and his men were engaged in front.

He took possession of the boat the boys had used, and then rowed back to camp to report the failure of the expedition.

And while the corporal and his men were boarding their boat, Clem and his comrades returned to the Wheeler house, to Estelle's great delight.

"We won the day without firing a shot," laughed Clem.

"I see you did," she smiled. "You boys are pretty smart."

A couple of hours later Mr. Wheeler rode up in company with the man Estelle had despatched for him.

She introduced their young American visitors to her father, and the situation was explained to him.

He was glad to meet the boys, and extended the hospitality of his home to them as long as they chose to stay.

Naturally their balloon trip to Brazil and Louisiana astonished him.

"We should like to reach Bahia, where we can get a steamer for the States," said Clem.

"Rio de Janeiro is about as near for you, and you can connect with a steamer even better than at Bahia," replied Mr. Wheeler. "I am going for my wife next week. She's at Rio. You can go with me in my conveyance, and I will see that you get off all right. I will purchase tickets for you all, as I presume you have no funds."

"We have a few rough diamonds that we found, which perhaps you can turn into money for us," replied Clem.

He hauled out the dozen big stones from his pocket and showed to their host.

"Why, where did you find these?" asked Mr. Wheeler, in great astonishment, after examining each of the stones attentively.

Clem told him how he and Will had found them in an old deserted mine in a ravine just off the valley where the soldiers had attacked the diamond poachers.

"Why, boys, these are uncommonly fine specimens. They'll pay your way to the United States fifty times over."

The boys stayed six days at the Wheeler home, and enjoyed themselves immensely.

Clem and Estelle took a decided fancy to each other, and to her, the day before the one set for their departure for Rio de Janeiro, he confided the secret of the contents of the bags.

"If I was you, Clem," she said. "I'd take a hundred of the best ones out and have them cut and polished on your own account and get the full value for them. The balance you can sell in the rough. You had better not attempt to sell them at Rio, for the Government would be almost certain to find out what you were about, and seize them pending settlement of their claim for royalty."

"Then I guess I had better box them up and carry them to the United States with me. I don't know what the duty on rough diamonds is, but it can't be near as much as on the finished article. We'll have to pay it whatever it is."

Clem and Estelle promised to correspond, and parted with evident regret.

Mr. Wheeler carried the boys to Rio in good shape and

put them up at a first-class hotel in that city while they waited for the arrival of a steamer to carry them north.

A cable message was forwarded to Mr. Ashmore at Gretna village, Louisiana, informing him that his son was safe and would soon be home once more.

A similar message was sent to Mr. Jefferson Fowler with respect to his son.

No message was necessary in Clem's case, as he had not to his knowledge a relative in the world.

In due time the boys reached New York.

The diamonds were held in bond by the custom house authorities, and arrangements were soon made for their sale in various lots at their appraised value.

The hundred best diamonds were held out, and for the rest the total amount received was fifty-five thousand dollars, from which the duty was deducted.

Clem had a dozen of the big diamonds cut and polished and afterward sold them for fifteen thousand dollars, half of which, after deducting the cost of putting them into shape, he forwarded to Will, who had already received about twenty thousand dollars, as his share of the rough.

The balance of the large diamonds went to Clem as finder of the treasure.

Clem had a set of diamond earrings made and expressed to Estelle.

He told her in a letter which accompanied the gift that he was keeping the very finest diamond of them all for an engagement ring for his future wife, and he said he hoped the ring in question would go to some one he knew in the Province of Goyaz, Brazil, which, as a matter of fact, he did after a year.

And Clem carried it there himself, and was formally betrothed to Estelle in the house where he had had the most stirring adventure in his young life.

A year later Clem returned to Brazil and married the girl of his heart.

He was worth about sixty thousand dollars, and had established a wholesale diamond business for himself in Maiden Lane, New York.

He often refers to his remarkable balloon adventure.

"It carried me not only from Louisiana to Brazil," he told his friends, "but practically from the darkness of poverty to the dawn of a bright and successful career in life."

THE END.

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